Canada and the
BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

9-12 April, 1917

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'A nation is a body of people who have done
great things together in the past
and who expect to do
great things together in the future.'

F.H. Underhill
The Image of Confederation (1964)

PREFACE

This book commemorates the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, when Canadian volunteers from every corner of the nation stormed the strongest natural fortress on the Western Front — one that had successfully withstood repeated French and British attacks over the previous two-and-a-half years.

It was the first time that all four divisions of the Canadian Corps had attacked together, but it would not be the last. And before the war ended, Canadian courage and military prowess had won Canada substantial recognition in the Imperial War Cabinet and a seat at the peace conference in Versailles.

Even more important, these battle honours gave Canadians a sense of being Canadian, of being citizens of an independent nation. The Canadian Forces have continued to foster this sense of nationhood through three more wars and a number of peacekeeping operations. Few events in our history have played such an important role in the development of the Canadian nation as the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

A.J.G.D. de Chastelain
General

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

In all his thirty-six years, Jack Harris had never been a man to spend much time with pen or pencil. His schooling had ended at the age of fourteen and he had become a bricklayer — a trade that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, required few writing skills beyond those necessary to sign for his pay.

Nor, in March 1917, as a mere private in the (now permanently) dismounted 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles was he privy to the counsels of Sir Douglas Haig, the commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France. Even the smaller-scale intentions of General Sir Henry Horne, the commander of the British First Army, with which the Canadian Corps was serving, and Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, the English aristocrat who commanded the Corps for the time being, were quite beyond his ken. He had not yet heard shots fired in anger, and he could hardly have known that he was about to participate in an apocalyptic battle. One, it has since been argued (by better-educated and more influential men than Jack, who were also there) that played a notable part in creating a Canadian identity.

All Private Harris knew was that he would soon be going into the trenches for the first time. Perhaps it was simply the imminent prospect of killing or being killed that led him to start a diary. He kept it intermittently, in pencil (in a surprisingly neat and trim hand) in a scrubby little soldier's notebook, eight centimetres by thirteen, that he carried in the pocket of his tunic; and a month after he began it he would record how a very ordinary man, who had been born and raised in the English countryside and essentially still thought of himself as an Englishman despite seven years in Canada, helped to make both military and Canadian history — and all unwittingly make himself into a Canadian!

The 9th of April, 1917, found him jammed together with several hundred of his fellow-soldiers in a tunnel cut through the chalk that underlay the south-western slopes of Vimy Ridge. There were many more men — thousands of them — waiting in other tunnels and caves, all safe for the moment against German shot and shell. They were faced by other hazards, however. Most of the thirteen tunnels, ill-lit by electric lights strung along the rough walls, were half a kilometre or more in length and only a metre wide.

Many of the occupants were there all day and half the night, smoking, sweating, eating cold food and drinking lukewarm tea brought up in dixies, farting and using barrels as toilets. Amazingly, not one of them one seems to have been asphyxiated, nor is there any account of someone developing claustrophobia.

With time to think, what did Jack Harris think about?

> ***Easter Sunday***
>
> *Very different to any other I have spent. Stay all day in tunnel, waiting for morning & the advance. Cannot put here all I thought of that day but felt I would come through somehow. Hope to spend next Easter in a far better manner. Had mail from Lou and kiddies — very acceptable.*

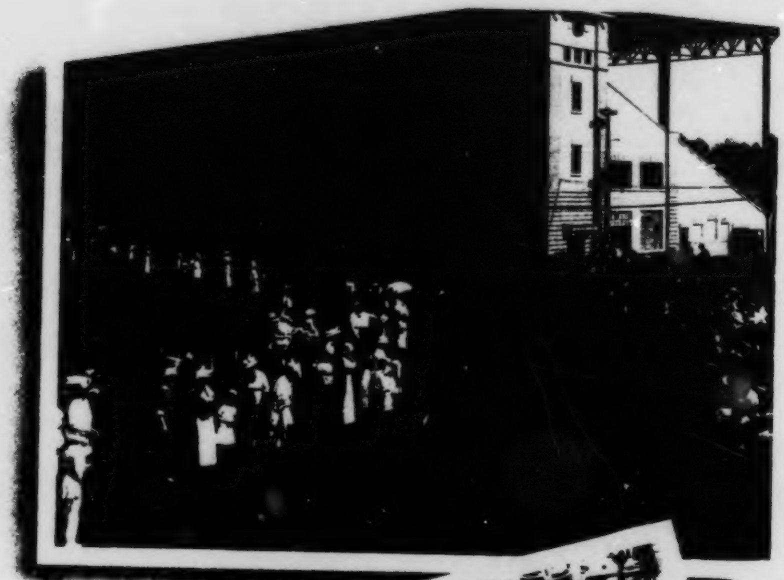
The next morning, minutes before first light, in snow and hail and rain, more than twenty-five thousand Canadians — with another ten thousand close behind — rose out of their trenches and tunnels along a seven-kilometre front and began to trudge up Vimy Ridge behind an awesome curtain of artillery fire mostly laid down by Canadian guns and gunners. Harris was among them, in the middle of the first wave. When he found time to record the next two eventful days his prose was terse, flat and simple.

> *Left tunnel [at] 3:30 a.m. for jumping-off trench. Mud to knees as usual. About 4:15 a.m. came the order to go over. At the same time [a] terrible barrage from our artillery opened up. Terrific — no other word describes it. Walked over top (too loaded to run). Lost track of rest of section. Very little return fire from Fritz. Shot at twice by Fritz from mouth of dug-out. [He] Missed. Threw bombs in after him & left him to 'A' Co[mpany's] S[ergeant]-Major. Found rest of party at Swichern [Zwischen] Trench. All had been more or less lost.*
>
> *Everything going fine. Made the objective in quick time and then helped* RCR*s to dig in and hold line. Were told relief would be in at night, but no such luck. Stayed in front line until Tuesday midnight, then took back to supports (Swichern). Lots of rain and snow all the trip. Relieved by 60th [Battalion] 8 p.m.*

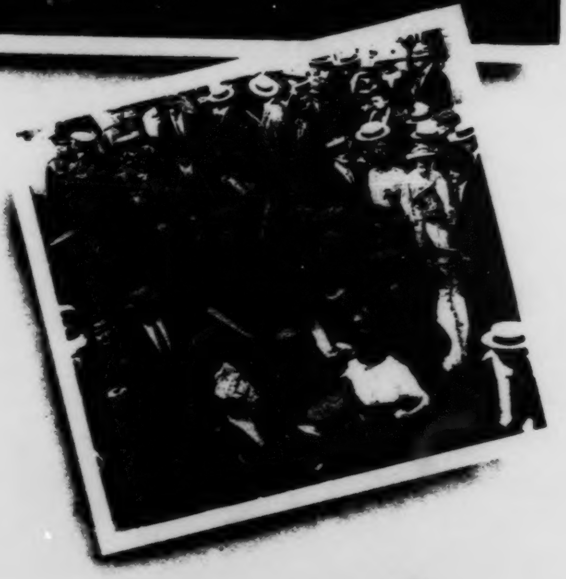
The attack did not go quite so easily everywhere along the front, but by that same Tuesday midnight Vimy Ridge, a natural fortress held by the Germans since October 1914, had fallen into Canadian hands at an amazingly small cost in lives. This was the greatest victory that the *Entente* — the British and French alliance — had yet achieved in nearly three years of fighting. How did it come about? And why was it so important in the evolution of Canadian nationhood?

CANADA AT WAR

The causes of the First World War lie beyond the scope of this book and have been much disputed by



Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, formed almost exclusively from former British servicemen resident in Canada at the outbreak of war (and many of them from the west), leaves Ottawa's Lansdowne Park for Valcartier. [NAC PA 23278]



"The Girl I Left Behind Me." Toronto's Royal Grenadiers mingle with friends and family as they march to Union Station to catch the train to Valcartier. [NAC PA 5122]

When Britain was at war all the King's subjects were at war. Volunteers from the Files Hills Indian Colony who joined Saskatchewan's 68th Battalion, together with members of their families. [NAC PA 66815] historians, but it is certain that they had nothing to do with Canada. Nevertheless, when Great Britain declared war on Germany and her Austro-Hungarian ally in August 1914, Canada, as a British colony sharing a British king, found itself automatically at war, too. Generally speaking, that was not an unpopular circumstance in a simpler, more naïve world than that in which we live today. Many people, particularly those of British descent, welcomed the opportunity to stand at Britain's side in what they viewed as a righteous cause.

Especially in western Canada there were numbers of British-born men who still thought of themselves primarily as Britons, with all the privileges and responsibilities that implied. Most of them enlisted as a matter of course just as soon as they could get near a recruiting station. And many young men born in Canada were equally keen. In their minds there flourished a rather romantic conception of war as a sporting contest, a sort of gigantic game in which some poor devils — but not many — would undoubtedly be killed or mutilated. They, of course, would not be among the unfortunate few.

Others, in a stagnant economy (and an era without any governmental social security) simply saw soldiering as a better bet than unemployment and an empty belly. Native people from all across the Dominion enlisted readily at first, perhaps because in their communities warriors had traditionally enjoyed a prestige that modern young Indians found it hard to acquire. The fighting on the Western Front would bear little resemblance to the kind of guerilla warfare that their forefathers had excelled at, but they could hardly know that at the time.

Despite a casual and often bungled recruiting process, and haphazard mobilization marked by the energetic but eccentric style of Minister of Militia (and enthusiastic amateur soldier) Sam Hughes, the First Contingent of a Canadian Expeditionary Force was in England by mid-October,* thirty thousand strong but with mostly inexperienced officers and men only half-trained in the barest fundamentals of soldiering. They spent a wet and muddy winter on Salisbury Plain, learning simple military skills but never dreaming that their experience with Wiltshire mud would serve them in such good stead in Flanders and Picardy.

With them were fifty of the one hundred 'graduates of almost every hospital training school in Canada ...

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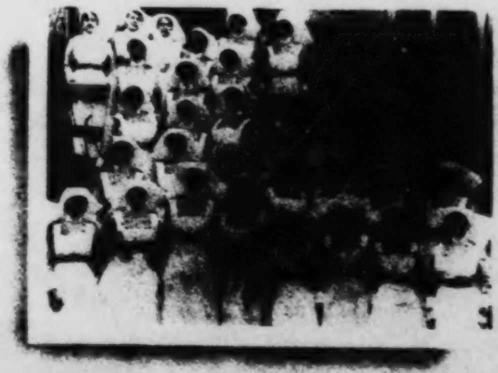
* Joining the convoy off St. John's was a ship carrying 537 officers and men of the Newfoundland Regiment who were not part of the CEF. Newfoundland, not yet part of Canada, sent its own little expeditonary force, one battalion strong.

The First Contingent crossing the Atlantic. [NAC PA 22731]

Arriving at Plymouth. A British officer watching them disembark thought that the Canadians would be fine "if their officers could be all shot." [NAC PA 22708]



Nursing sisters from the francophone Canadian General Hospital that served the French army. [DND PMR 87-465] among whom were some French Canadians', according to Lieutenant (Nursing Sister) Mabel Clint of Montreal, hurriedly commissioned into the Army Medical Service 'for the duration of the war'. Most of the other fifty went with the first Canadian Expeditionary Force unit to reach France, crossing the Channel on 8 November 1914, to help with British casualties until the arrival of the 1st Division and the onset of the Second Battle of Ypres brought them compatriots to treat.*

It was not quite so easy to recruit another twenty thousand men for a Second Contingent, the last of whom arrived in England in June 1915. 'The most enthusiastic centres were in the West and Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton, Calgary, could have raised thousands where hundreds were required,' recorded the *Canadian Annual Review* for 1914, 'Parts of Ontario and Quebec seemed slow in their response; New Brunswick raised a Regiment after weeks of work and many public meetings and Nova Scotia did the same.'

For French Canadians, particularly Quebeckers, part of the problem was language. Although the pre-war militia was pragmatically bilingual in Quebec (and Ottawa paid lip service, at least, to the concept of a French-speaking militia) the initial Canadian Expeditionary Force was an exclusively anglophone institution. Recruiting officers everywhere, even in Quebec, were all too often unilingual English-speakers, cronies of Sam Hughes, and one way or another there was very little encouragement for unilingual francophones to enlist.

There were prominent French Canadians most anxious to see their community play a full part, however; and as early as 10 September *La Presse,* Montreal's leading French-language paper, had reported on their approach to Ottawa with the idea of forming a two thousand-strong francophone regiment. That would have meant two battalions, but some patriotic citizens were even thinking in terms of four battalions, or a francophone brigade.

La Presse noted that French Canadian members of the Conservative administration in Ottawa, as well as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the opposition Liberals, supported the proposal. Both *La Presse* itself (linked to Laurier) and *La Patrie* (financed by Conservative businessman Hugh Graham) backed the idea. Indeed, there was a surprising degree of agreement throughout the francophone media. An *ad hoc* committee, half-Liberal and half-Conservative, that included the Premier of Quebec, Sir Lomer Gouin, the mayor of Montreal,

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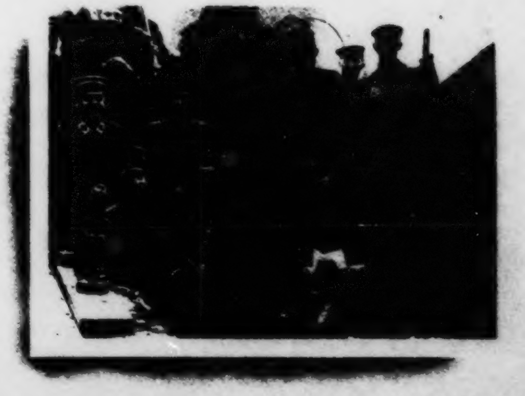
* By the end of the war, 2,400 more nurses would have served overseas.

Practising for Flanders! Dinner time on Salisbury Plain. [NAC PA 5032]

The 22nd Battalion at St Jean, Quebec, preparing to go overseas. [NAC PA 4912]



German troops secure on Vimy Ridge, autumn 1914 [DND PMR 91-014]

Médéric Martin, and a variety of senators, judges and influential journalists, pressed for the creation of a French-speaking force.

Representatives met formally with Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden on 28 September to put their case, and Borden took the opportunity to thank Dr. Arthur Mignault of Montreal who had offered $50,000 (a much greater sum then than now) towards the cost of such a force. Three weeks later a Cabinet order authorized the formation of specifically French-speaking units although, as in the rest of Canada, recruiting did not live up to expectations. Only enough volunteers came forward to establish one battalion. Numbered as the 22nd Battalion, CEF, it became part of the Second Contingent — the precursor of today's *Royal 22e Régiment du Canada*, or (in unofficial English) the 'Van Doos'.

No wonder that recruiting was becoming more difficult. The carefree and romantic had mostly gone off with the First Contingent and the unemployed were finding jobs in an economy that was beginning to expand. Beyond that, the harsh and painful reality of modern war was now recognizable in the reports of war correspondents appearing in the newspapers. By November 1914 an initially mobile Western Front had solidified into trench lines that stretched from the Swiss Alps to the North Sea. There were no flanks left to be turned on the low-lying Flanders plain and the terrible triad of artillery, machine-guns and barbed wire made frontal attacks prohibitively expensive at a time when tanks were not even on the drawing board. By the end of 1914, after five months of fighting, each side had lost more than three-quarters of a million men killed, wounded or captured.

THE CANADIANS IN FRANCE

Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, a battalion recruited almost entirely from British Army veterans* and therefore requiring less training, reached France (as part of a British division) in December 1914. The 1st Division followed in February, in a welter of confusion. Private Alexander Sinclair had something to say about that in his diary.

> *There's an expectant stir in camp this morning, and there's more bustle, and* sans doute *the usual confusion — the word 'confusion' has become synonymous with 'Canadian contingent'; and just recently I have heard it referred to as the 'comedian contingent'.... But there's excuse, and to spare, for we are expected to leave this afternoon ... for France.*

The divison arrived in time to play a very minor part in the battle of Neuve Chapelle, where it incurred only a hundred casualties. Tunes

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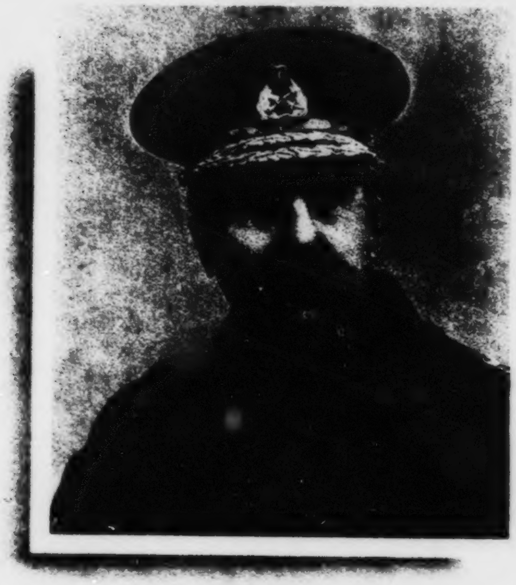
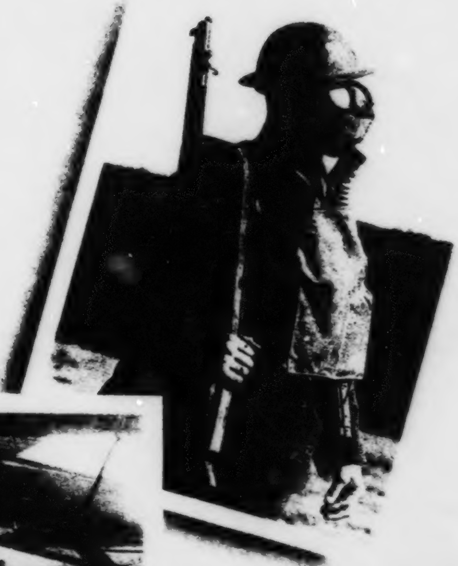
* At the instigation of Hamilton Gault, a Montreal businessman, who had provided $100,000 towards its cost.



Lieutenant-General E.A.H. Alderson, the British general officer first selected to command the Canadians. He had had Canadians under his command in the South African War, fifteen years earlier. [NAC PA 168103]

Clumsy and uncomfortable but generally effective, an anti-gas box respirator of the kind eventually introduced in August 1916. [NAC PA 928]



No 3 Casualty Clearing Station, July 1916. Primitive by today's standards, but better than anything before it. [NAC PA 104]

of glory could still echo briefly in young mens' ears but only six weeks later came the Second Battle of Ypres, when the Canadians found themselves in the midst of the fighting and the Germans employed poison gas — chlorine — for the first time on the Western Front.

Gas warfare had been prohibited by the Hague Convention of 1899, which all the major protagonists had signed, but that prohibition had not been re-affirmed in the 1907 Convention. Nevertheless, the *Entente* troops had no gas masks or anti-gas training. 'We had been warned some days before that an attack would probably be made by the Germans with gas,' wrote Major Victor Odlum of the 7th Battalion, 'and we were told to take necessary precautions [but] we could not visualize an attack with gas ... and we did not know what were the necesary precautions. And no one could tell us.'

French colonial troops on the Canadians' left, exposed to the worst of it, panicked and fled on 22 April 1915. The Canadians held firm, pulling back the left of their line to hold the shoulder of the gap and then moving up their reserve brigade to join British troops in bringing the enemy to a stop three kilometres short of Ypres.

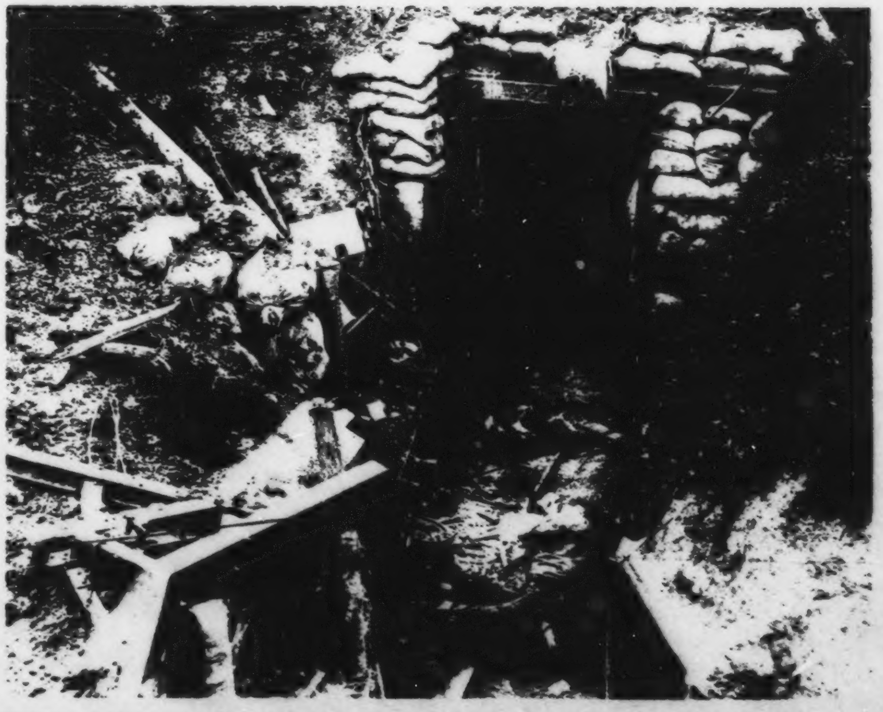
Forty-eight hours later a second gas attack fell directly upon the 1st Division. Major H.H. Matthews, commanding a company of the 8th Battalion, which bore the brunt of the attack, recounted what he saw and felt in a letter written shortly after the battle.

> *The wall of vapour appeared to me to be at least fifteeen feet in height, white on top, the remainder being of a greenish-yellow colour. Although the breeze was of the slightest, it advanced with great rapidity and was on us in less than three minutes.*
>
> *It is impossible for me to give a real idea of the terror and horror spread among us all by this filthy loathsome pestilence. It was not, I think, the fear of death or anything supernatural, but the great dread that we could not stand the fearful suffocating sensation sufficiently to be each in our proper places and able to resist to the uttermost the attack which we felt sure must follow.*

Matthews' fears were unfounded. When the attack began Victor Odlum noticed 'a strange new smell.... A queer brownish-yellow haze was blowing in from the north. Our eyes smarted. Breathing became unpleasant and throats raw.... Some fell and choked, and writhed and frothed on the ground.... It was the gas.' But there was no panic as men with wet cloths wrapped about their noses and

General Alderson decorates an unknown Canadian lance-corporal (and grenadier, by his arm badge) in the aftermath of Second Ypres. Behind the corporal, others wait their turn. [DND DHist-1]

Dr. John McCrae, for whom the poppies blew in Flanders fields and who died of pneumonia in 1918. [DND CF66-473]



A German trench wrecked by artillery fire, July 1916. On the ground, close by the body of a German soldier, his water bottle, mess tin, and looted back-pack. [NAC PA 128] mouths[*] — urine was better than water, they found! — gave ground slowly, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. A private in the British Army's Seaforth Highlanders, who arrived on the scene the next day, recalled how his section 'stopped at a ditch at a first aid clearing station.'

> *There were about two to three hundred men lying in that ditch. Some were clawing at their throats. Their brass buttons were green. Their bodies were swelled. Some of them were still alive. They were not wearing their belts or equipment and we thought they were Germans. One inquisitive fellow turned a dead man over. He saw a brass clip bearing the name CANADA on the corpse's shoulder and exclaimed 'These are Canadians!' ...Some of the Canadians were still writhing on the ground, their tongues hanging out....*
>
> *Then we reached the front line Canadian trenches. There were no trenches left.*

German gas supplies were exhausted for the moment, but the battle went on in a more conventional fashion. Before it was over the Canadians had lost nearly a third of their number — six thousand men killed, wounded, gassed, or taken prisoner out of an authorized strength of sixteen thousand, five hundred. Compare that figure with the three hundred and forty Canadians killed or wounded in two years of South African fighting only fifteen years earlier. War had become unbelievably more destructive: and the fact was not lost on either the men in the field or on potential recruits and their families back in Canada.

Major John McCrae, the medical officer of a Canadian artillery brigade, knew personally many of the men he tended at Ypres and in the dying stages of the battle — no pun intended — lost a very close friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was killed by a German shell that exploded at his feet. The next day, between dealing with batches of wounded, Dr. McCrae scribbled some verses on a handy scrap of paper.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amidst the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and
now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though
poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

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[*] Smoke helmets — chemically impregnated bags with transparent celluloid windows, to be worn over the head — were issued two months later. The first 'small box respirators', or proper gas masks, were not introduced until August 1916.

Sir Richard Turner, VC. Brave men do not necessarily make good generals. [NAC PA 7941]

Sir Julian Byng. [NAC PA 1356]

With his pear-shaped body (and an unmilitary hand in his pocket) Arthur Currie - here guiding Canadian senators near the front in 1916 - never much looked like a soldier; but he was probably the finest general Canada has yet produced. [NAC PA 237]

Second Ypres was merely a harbinger of things to come. In the first weeks of the war, before the trench stalemate had been established, the Germans had lunged forward and occupied most of Belgium and much of north-eastern France. Then, as the front settled down, they had given up small amounts of territory when expedient, in order to establish strong positions on the most advantageous ground. Anxious to recover both their territory and their reputations, puzzled French generals (and, of course, their British and Belgian peers) struggled to find a way to prise the Germans out of those positions, but topography and technology almost always defeated them. Their attempts to adjust their conventional theories of war to current realities were curiously inept.

The Germans had learned to dig deep shelters, where their machine-gunners could take cover while the artillery barrage passed over them, and still pop up to lay curtains of interlocking fire across the front of the attacking infantry. They erected impenetrable tangles of barbed wire, criss-crossing No-man's-land, that funnelled their enemies into killing zones. But time after time, following ever-heavier artillery bombardments that chewed up the ground over which their soldiers must advance (and gave the Germans good warning of the attack to come) the *Entente* generals launched their men into infernos of fire.

Each time they failed, they modified their tactics —- but only very slightly and always along the simplistic lines of more men and more guns. The Germans reacted by digging more and deeper shelters, often with concrete cover, to protect themselves. With greater numbers and more high-explosives, communication and control was becoming a major problem at every level of command, for telephone wire took time to lay and was easily cut by shellfire, while radio communication, although technically feasible, could not yet meet the practical demands of the battlefield.

Wiser generals might have toyed with the possibilities of dispersion, infiltration, or surprise — or simply decided to stand on the defensive until such time as some original thinking or new technology could give them a better chance of success. In England, thoughtful men were now thinking in terms of caterpillar-tracked, armed and armoured motor vehicles — landships — to lead the assault. But all the generals in France seemed trapped in their own conventional thinking and their men suffered as a result.

Canadian officers lacked the professional background to challenge that thinking and, obediently, the 1st Division was flung against the enemy

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George (cattily, but accurately) described Sir Douglas Haig as "brilliant to the tops of his boots." [DND DHist-4]

The 8th Battalion, CEF, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel (later Major-General) Louis Lipsett, marches past Stonehenge soon after its arrival in England in 1914. [NAC PA 117875]

DAWSON–BERLIN 7460 MILES

Volunteers from the Yukon, leaving Dawson City. They never quite got to Berlin but they did help to win the war. [NAC PA 4984] wire at Aubers Ridge in May 1915, at Festubert that same month, and again at Loos in September and October. Week by week, the casualty lists grew longer.

A CANADIAN CORPS

A 2nd Canadian Division formed from the Second Contingent arrived in France in September 1915. Command of it was given to a Canadian militia officer and Quebec businessman, Major-General Richard Turner, a Victoria Cross winner of the South African War who had formerly commanded the 1st Division's 3rd Brigade. The two divisions were then combined to form a Canadian Corps under British Lieutenant-General E.A.H. Alderson who was promoted from commanding the 1st Division.

Taking Alderson's old place was another Canadian militia officer who had been leading the 1st Brigade. The ungainly, pear-shaped body and lugubrious features of Major-General Arthur Currie, a Vancouver Island realtor who had fallen on hard times before the war and been saved from financial ruin by mobilization, were not militarily inspiring but appearances were to prove deceptive.

St. Eloi, in April 1916, when the untried 2nd Division was put in to hold a piece of ground taken by the British but made quite unrecognizable in the process by an enormously liberal use of high explosive and too much rain, was a disaster. A lack of aerial reconnaissance and poor staff work left the Canadians believing that they held some gigantic mine craters that were actually still in German hands. It took a week — an expensive, painful week — to get the situation sorted out, and afterwards Alderson asked Turner to join him in putting in an adverse report on one of the latter's brigadiers. Turner refused and Alderson then proposed replacing Turner as well, only to have his request denied by Haig who was unwilling to annoy Ottawa by sacking two senior Canadians.

Instead, Alderson was the one to go, 'kicked upstairs' to be Inspector-General of the Canadians in England, and command of the Corps passed to the Honourable Sir Julian Byng, eighth child of the Earl of Stafford, a long-service British regular who had commanded a British corps for the past three months. 'Why am I sent to the Canadians? I don't know a Canadian,' Byng responded to the congratulations of a friend. 'Why this stunt?... However, there it is. I am ordered to these people and will do my best.' Byng's appointment roughly coincided with the arrival of the 3rd Division, commanded (because Sam Hughes disliked and distrusted all Permanent Force officers) by a Toronto lawyer, Major-General Malcolm Mercer.

Alderson had been more acceptable to the Canadians than many British officers might have been, but Byng's cheerful informality really won them over. A senior medical officer, Andrew McPhail, waiting for the new corps commander to inspect his hospital, was surprised to find that instead of arriving on horseback, all pomp and ceremony, with mounted troopers to clear the way and an *aide de camp* and a couple of orderlies trotting behind, 'he came into the horse lines through a hedge, jumping the ditch as unaffectedly as a farmer would come on a neighbour's place to look at his crops ... this is a soldier — large, strong, lithe, with worn boots and frayed puttees.'

Soon the Canadians were happily referring to themselves as 'the Byng boys.' Even Douglas Haig — not the most perspicacious of men — noticed the difference. At the end of July he wrote to the king about a visit he had just made to the Canadian Corps headquarters, where 'I found a greatly improved atmosphere there since he [Byng] assumed command. Before there was always a certain amount of jealousy and friction between the several Canadian divisions.'

Byng's ideas and reforms would take time to develop, promulgate and implement, however. At Mount Sorrel, in June 1916, he drove the Canadians forward relentlessly, in the now traditional fashion, as they took another three thousand casualties in a week merely to restore the *status quo* after a surprise German attack that cost the 1st and newly-arrived 3rd Divisons six thousand officers and men, including General Mercer who was reconnoitring his front line at the time. The 4th CMRs, where Mercer was when the blow fell, lost 89 % of its strength in four days.

Mercer's command was given to Major-General Louis Lipsett, formerly of the Ist Division's 2nd Brigade, a British officer who had been serving in Canada at the outbreak of war and had volunteered to stay with the CEF. The 4th Division, under command of yet another militia officer, Major-General David Watson (who owned the *Quebec Chronicle*) would join the Corps in August. Meanwhile, Ottawa was settling on a (too low) figure of five thousand replacements a month to maintain the sixty thousand men in the front line that the Cabinet concluded were needed to buy a place for Canada in Imperial war councils.

At least another forty thousand were needed to support them, organizing and delivering supplies, policing rear areas, servicing base hospitals, or clerking at divisional and corps headquarters. More still were needed in England and Canada to administer the training and replacement pipelines. Altogether, Ottawa thought, it might be necessary to muster half a million men — and Borden pledged his government to do just that on 1 January 1916. It was the impact of that announcement that led Jack Harris — a middle-aged man by the standards of the day, with the welfare of a wife and two children to consider — to the recruiting booth on the last day of January. His wife never spoke to him for two weeks after that!

A CANADIAN IDENTITY

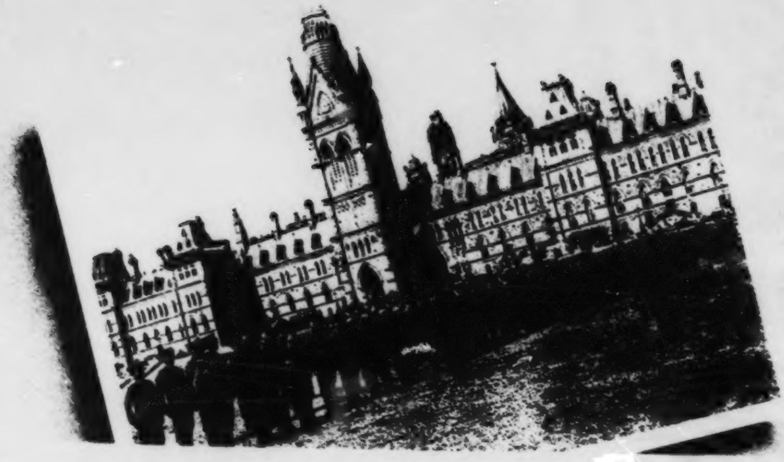
In Canada a steady flow of recruits was passing through the initial training depots, as it had done since the outbreak of war. These men came from every corner of the country and the sociological and cultural impact of their coming together was quite unprecedented in Canada's brief history. Although units — both battalions and brigades — had initially been organized on local and regional bases, military expedience soon mixed them up both as individuals and units. It is a point worth expanding upon.

Canada had been cobbled together for purely pragmatic — and often none too moral — reasons. Those who confederated in 1867 did so for political or economic advantage, their common decision-making bolstered by two things: British determination to withdraw the garrisons from their North American colonies, and a belief that, in unity, there would be better prospects of thwarting any possibility of American annexation. Since 1841 (at the behest of London) Quebec and Ontario had been one province, and Canada East only favoured confederation in order to escape the tightening (and potentially suffocating) embrace of Canada West. After Rupert's Land (subsequently the prairie provinces) was purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869, British Columbia was bribed with the promise of a railway in 1871 and Prince Edward Island with the payment of its debts in 1873.

Any sense of commonality or community was noticeably lacking in this Dominion of Canada. Five-and-a-half thousand kilometres of largely empty space lay between Halifax and Victoria. The Maritimes were cut off from Quebec by the northern spur of an Appalachian mountain range that reached to the south shore of the St. Lawrence. Quebec and Ontario were a geographic unity, divided by language and culture more than by the Ottawa river, but Ontario and the prairie provinces were held well apart by a wasteland of rock and water. British Columbia, beyond the Rocky Mountains, was a world unto itself.

Even by 1914, Canadians still had little in common. There was only one trans-continental railway, no trans-Canada highway, no CBC or commercial radio, no television. Newspapers were local and regional.

The 38th Battalion parading on Parliament Hill before sailing to Europe. This was the old Centre Block and the old Victoria Tower, both destroyed by fire in 1917. [NAC PA 4987]



Somewhere in this picture is Jack Harris, marching with the rest of the 169th Battalion to have an official photograph taken at Camp Niagara in June 1916. Whyen the battalion was broken up for reinforcements, Jack went to the 4th CMR. [NAC PA 69817]

Nothing very elegant about practising to stick a bayonet in a man's belly, but the Germans were supposed to be afraid of "cold steel." [NAC PA 4965]

Aeroplanes were oddities, automobiles still unreliable novelties (the first Highway and Traffic Act had been introduced in 1913) and travel expensive in time and money, and mostly beyond the financial reach of the lower-middle and working classes.

The population of the Dominion was only a little over seven million (more than half of it in Ontario and Quebec) and there were, overall, nearly as many foreign-born as native-born. Three million immigrants had arrived in the past fifteen years, more than a million from the United Kingdom, nearly a million from the United States, and most of the rest from central and northern Europe. Only four cities, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver, could claim more than a hundred thousand inhabitants, and half the population could be found in the countryside.

The only national institutions, in any sense of the word, were Parliament and the executive arms of the Federal government, the post office, and the Canadian Pacific Railway. And of those, the first two were certainly more politically elite than socially populist! The social, cultural and intellectual isolation that beset ordinary citizens is hard for us to visualize today.

But between 1914 and 1916 tens of thousands of men from every corner of the country had been thrown together, wearing the same kind of clothes, doing the same kinds of things, and trying to avoid the less pleasant kinds of bureaucratic adversity. Before the war was over, six hundred thousand of them would have worn the king's uniform, and more than four hundred and fifty thousand (out of a male population of two-and-a-half million between the ages of eighteen and forty-five) would have served overseas, where they were, one and all, labelled by their allies as Canadians rather than New Brunswickers, Quebeckers, Albertans or whatever, as they had naturally categorized themselves in pre-war days at home.

Crossing the Atlantic in 1915, in the company of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, recruited in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, Ken Duggan, an officer of Toronto's 4th CMRs, noted that the 5th 'are an awfully nice lot of fellows.' Cape Breton miners argued the toss with Moose Jaw teamsters; preppy Montreal students and rowdy Vancouver longshoremen played baseball against each other; hard-nosed loggers from New Brunswick's North Shore got a little drunk (and perhaps landed in jail) with prim and proper shop assistants who had never before known anything much beyond Toronto the Good.

Ben Wagner, a country boy from Paisley, in Ontario's Bruce County, remembered (in Daphne Read's 1978 book, *The Great War and Canadian Society*) apparently with some surprise, how he 'met people not only from all over Canada ... but you met them from all ranks of life, and they all looked the same.'

> *We were in Witley Camp and right alongside us was a battalion from French Canada. We didn't speak much French and they didn't speak much English, but they were the finest sports[men] you ever saw. Any kind of spare time you had, they were out with a baseball bat or something like that. And they were a dandy crowd, jovial, friendly. I got an entirely different opinion of the French Canadians because of being with these people. You met people from Nova Scotia, or from Prince Edward Island, clean through to British Columbia. Very often you didn't take any notice of the fact unless they happened to mention it. And you never knew if the fella alongside you was a Catholic or a Protestant, or — which is almost as serious — a Liberal or a Tory. You just took him for granted, and he took you for granted, and that was all there was to it.*

This was social engineering on the grandest scale. No one expressed it in precisely those terms, but that is exactly what it was.

VERDUN AND THE SOMME

Early in 1916, *General* Erich von Falkenhayn, commander-in-chief of the German armies in the west, sought to break the strategic stalemate imposed by trench warfare by deliberately initiating a battle of attrition. He attacked the French at a strategically sensitive point (the ancient fortress city of Verdun, on the river Meuse, which they could not afford to relinquish for reasons of morale) planning to either break through and eventually take the road to Paris, or to destroy his enemies' will to continue the fight by inflicting unbearable casualties on them. The French reaction was exemplified in the slogan, '*Ils ne passeront pas*' — 'They shall not pass.'

The battle for Verdun raged for ten months, each side losing close to half a million men in an indecisive fight over a piece of ground no more than twenty kilometres by five. The French held on, however, losing some ground but not Verdun itself; while on the wider plains of eastern Europe a Russian general, Alexei Brusilov, launched a successful counter — offensive against the Austrians and Germans along a five hundred – kilometre front. Von Falkenhayn had miscalculated and now, east and west, the Germans found their resources stretched to the limit.

Anxious to seize the moment but unable to do so alone, *Général* Joseph Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, demanded that the British join him in putting the kind of pressure on the enemy that von Falkenhayn was still trying to exercise at Verdun. For political reasons, the British had to be seen to do a fair share of fighting (their front had been relatively quiet since the Battle of Loos) and Sir Douglas Haig had little choice but to agree. The chosen battlefield — reluctantly accepted by Haig, who would have preferred an attack in Flanders to pin the Germans against the Channel shore — lay at the junction between the French and British armies, along the Somme river.

The prevailing German concept of defence was still a linear one — three lines of trenches, front, support, and reserve, dug only a few hundred metres apart, with two-thirds of each front-line division manning them and the other third held close at hand. Every rifleman in a front-line regiment was to be found within five hundred metres of No-man's-land, even though the ever-increasing weight of *Entente* artillery fire meant that the casualty rates imposed by such a forward defence were coming to match those of their attackers.

British attack doctrine called for the infantry who made the actual assault to depend upon 'the artillery solely, with very slight support from selected snipers and Company sharpshooters' until the bayonet could be 'the decisive factor.' Men with only rudimentary training — and by now British, French and Canadians alike were undertrained* — were most easily organized in straight lines, so commanders attached much importance to the need to maintain such lines, with men about two metres apart and some slight allowance for the difficulties of advancing over broken ground.

'In many instances experience has shown that to capture a hostile trench a single line of men has usually failed,' announced Haig's staff, in a curiously mathematical approach to tactics. 'Two lines have generally failed but sometimes succeeded, three lines have generally succeeded but sometimes failed, and four or more lines have generally succeeded.'

This preference for linear advances was heavily reinforced by the need for the infantry to 'lean on the barrage' as they went forward, so that they would be on top of the enemy's trenches before he could surface and bring those machine-guns into action. Only by doing that could they hope to arrive with enough men left to defeat him in hand-to-hand (or, more often, grenade-to-grenade) fighting, and a more-or-less matching straight line of artilley fire was essential in order to minimize the danger of men being hit by their own side's shrapnel. And,

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* Of the 50,000 Canadians sent to France between April 1915 and October 1916, some 20,000 were considered by their own commanders to be only partially trained.

Aerial photography meant that the enemy could not hide the shape and extent of his defences. A helpful intelligence officer has plotted dug-outs, wire (and gaps in it) and a buried cable in this photograph of German positions near Vimy. Note how the first line of wire zig-zags, and how the trenches are dug so that their defenders cannot be subjected to enfilading fire from a flank. [NAC C 55268]

Generalfeldmarschall von Hindenburg, left, with General Ludendorff. [DND DHist-3]

One of the tanks supporting the Canadian attack at Flers-Courcelette. [NAC PA 1012].

indeed, that kind of straight line barrage was what the gunners were best equipped and trained to deliver. Straight lines were the watchword.

So, on 1 July 1916, began another holocaust, preceded by seven days of drumfire from fifteen hundred *Entente* guns, intended primarily to cut gaps in the German wire and prevent their working parties from re-establishing it by night. It was easy, with shrapnel and high explosive, to make the ground untenable for repair parties — harder to cut the wire to any significant extent. Sharp slivers of red-hot metal from shells time-fused to explode just above the ground would cut wire only if the shell exploded within it at exactly the right moment. If the explosion came a hundredth of a second too soon, then the fragments would be harmlessly dispersed in the air; if it came too late, they would be buried in the mud.

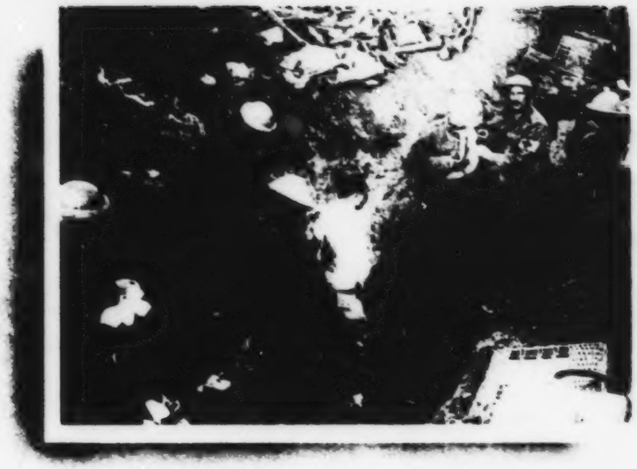
All too often the wire remained intact. Then, at zero hour, the barrage began to creep across the German trenches, lifting a hundred metres every two minutes. Close behind it, the over-laden 'Poor Bloody Infantry' clambered out of their trenches and began to trudge forward through the mud, over the shell-torn ground, searching for the few gaps in the wire.

The Germans, tense in their trenches and dug-outs until the barrage had passed over them, promptly manned their fire steps to slaughter the men struggling with that abominable wire. 'Has anyone seen the corporal? I know where he is...' sang the ironic survivors of each fruitless attack, once the slaughter was done for the moment and they were settled in the warmth and joviality of a canteen or *estaminet* somewhere behind the lines.

Has anyone here seen the corporal?
I know where he is —
He's hanging on the old barbed wire.

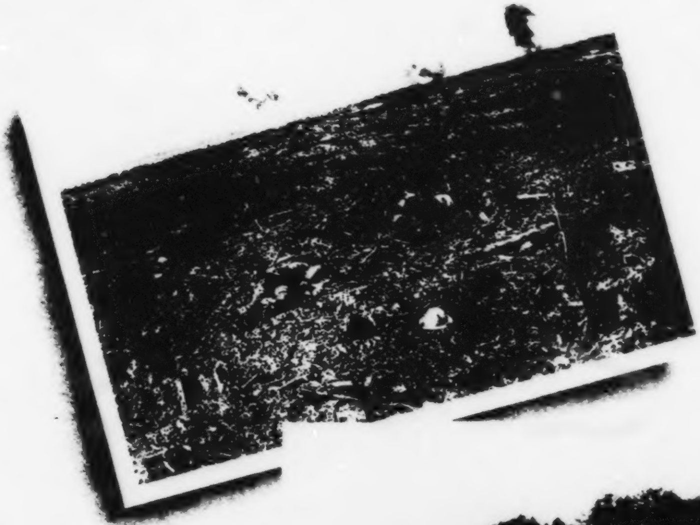
How do you know? I saw him.
I saw him, I saw him,
Hanging on the old barbed wire.

The Germans were no better at economizing in lives. While Joffre and Haig demanded that their men attack again and again, von Falkenhayn was ordering that every metre of Somme mud must be held by his, no matter what the cost. Most assaults petered out with the attackers decimated by shrapnel and machine-guns and their opponents equally diminished by high explosive and gas, for the *Entente* armies were now using gas, too. (Phosgene, a nastier kind, was now the gas of choice, but mustard gas, the nastiest of all, would not be used until the summer of 1917.) Occasionally, at enormous cost, the attackers did reach and take an enemy trench in a frenzy of close-quarter fighting — only to face desperate counter-attacks which were

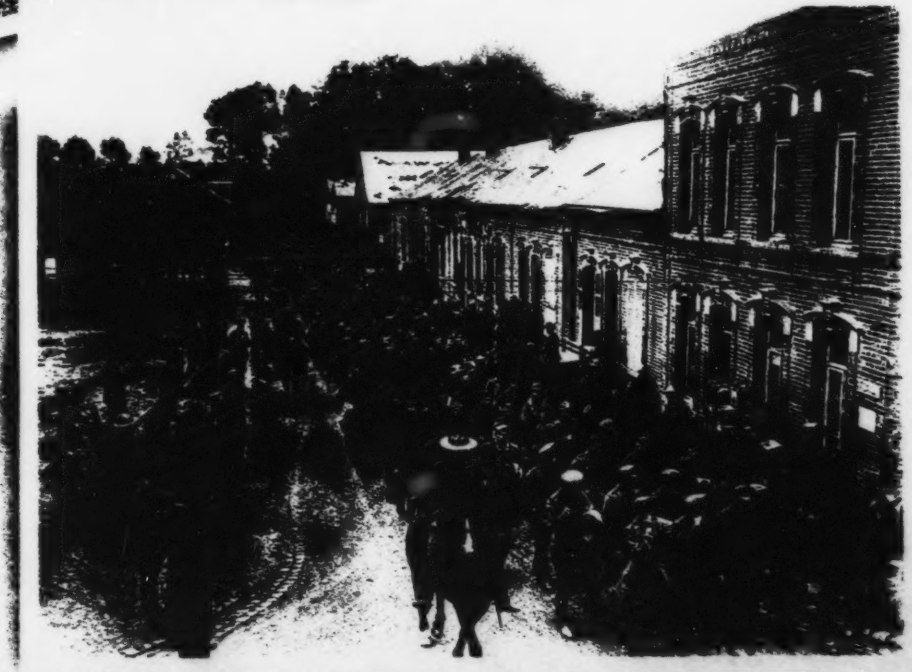


A dressing station near the front, September 1916. Medicine had made startling advances since the South African War, and even without antibiotic drugs these men stood a better chance of surviving their wounds than soldiers from any previous war. [NAC PA 909]

No-man's-land, with shells bursting in the distance. [NAC PA 786]



German prisoners captured on the Somme marching to the rear under a mounted escort. Why those in front should wish to hide their faces from the camera is a mystery. [NAC PA 962]



sometimes repulsed, but more often not. Since the ground behind them — the old No-man's-land — was a trackless morass of mud and water from the artillery fire of both sides, and usually still under enemy fire, it was extremely difficult to get enough ammunition and grenades forward to hold the new line.

The Newfoundland Regiment, serving in a British division, was there on the notorious "First Day on the Somme", when virtually everyone attacked along a forty-kilometre front — a third of it French — and the British Third and Fourth Armies lost more than fifty-seven thousand men. Over seven hundred of them were Newfies, killed and wounded in thirty terrible minutes at Beaumont Hamel. It was the good fortune of the Canadian battalions, however, that they all missed the early stages of the battle.

THE CANADIAN CORPS ON THE SOMME

The Canadian Corps, still three divisions strong, remained in the Ypres Salient — its role 'stationary yet aggressive' — through the early stages of the battle. During the summer the last of its Canadian-designed and built Ross rifles (one of Sam Hughes' pet projects) which had proved quite unable to withstand the rigours of field service, were withdrawn and replaced with British Lee-Enfields.

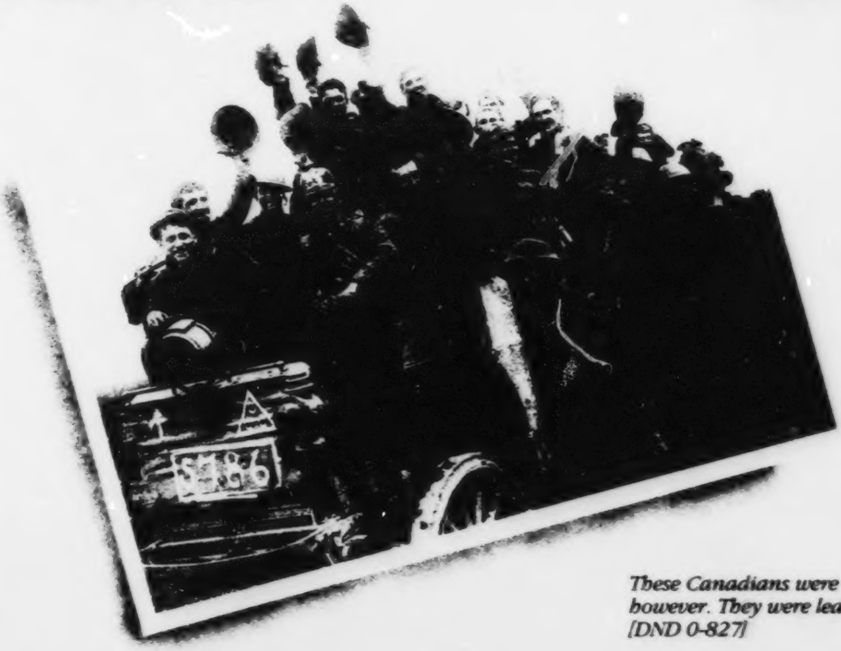
Meanwhile the British and French were incurring nearly two hundred thousand and more than seventy thousand casualties respectively by the end of August, while their opponents lost an estimated two hundred thousand. All this so that the *Entente* could re-occupy a stretch of blood-soaked mud along both banks of the Somme river averaging less than a kilometre in depth.

Von Falkenhayn was replaced. *Generalfeldmarschall* Paul von Hindenburg, who had been commander-in-chief in the East and would soon be, in effect, the Supreme Commander of all the armies of the Central Powers, now took over. With him, as his chief of staff, came *Generalleutnant* Erich Ludendorff, a man both willing and anxious to find an answer to the tactical riddles of trench warfare.

On the *Entente* side, despite a growing groundswell of discontent at the political level, the British and French remained committed to their current commanders. Although Joffre would be sacked at the turn of the year, Haig — a personal friend of King George V — would hold his appointment to the very end of the war.

His earlier thrusts by British and Australian troops having petered out, Haig decided in mid-August to launch another major offensive in mid-September using 'fresh forces and all available resources.' Sir Henry

The strain of battle is sharply etched on the face of these Canadian soldiers leaving the front November 1916. [NAC PA 832]



These Canadians were very happy indeed, however. They were leaving the Somme. [DND 0-827]

Rawlinson, one of the more progressive British generals (which is still not saying much in his favour) proposed a three-stage attack mounted on three successive moonlight nights. His superior rejected that idea, preferring to gamble on a single blow delivered in the traditional way. With one minor deviation — to be recounted in a moment — artillery would conquer and infantry would occupy.

Part of the 'fresh forces' would be Canadian. The weight of the attack would lie with Rawlinson's Fourth Army, while Sir Hubert Gough's Reserve Army, including the Canadian Corps, would push forward to protect Rawlinson's flank. The Canadians marched south from Ypres, and the 1st Divison took over a relatively quiet corps-sized sector of the Somme front while the 2nd and 3rd Divisions prepared for the coming battle. The 4th Division was busy training, bringing its units up to scratch far behind the front.

From the beginning, the auguries were bad. Even while tussling (together with an Australian brigade) for control of one measly little section of crumbling trench and holding it against the inevitable counter-attacks, the 1st Division's 3rd Brigade incurred a thousand casualties in a week. And on 8 September, while the 2nd Brigade was in the process of taking over the front, the Germans skilfully regained an entirely obliterated trench.

On 15 September the 2nd and 3rd Divisions participated in the grand assault, in which tanks were used in war for the first time. Manned by British Army crews, they gave the Germans a nasty shock and did much for British morale. 'A tank is walking up the High Street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind,' reported one gleeful observer. On the German side, their use was reported as 'not war but bloody butchery' according to a Canadian Corps intelligence summary.

But they were not, as yet, a decisive arm. They could break down wire — indeed, they did so. They were impervious to rifle and machine-gun fire, and all but direct hits from heavier guns, while their own cannon and machine-guns were wreaking havoc on the enemy; but they were slow and unreliable and, despite their caterpillar tracks, the mud was often too much for them.

On better ground they might have done better, and their premature introduction on the Somme was an indication of the generals' desperate desire to find a quick solution to the tactical dilemma that faced them. Altogether, forty-nine tanks were assigned to the attack out of the sixty then in France, but only thirty-two managed to reach their start lines and only ten lasted long enough to help the infantry on to their objectives. Eight tanks were allotted to the Canadians. Four got stuck in the mud, one was wrecked by a shell, one broke down, one turned back just before reaching its objective, and one arrived on the enemy's third trench line, where it did considerable physical damage before leaving the infantry to hold their gains. The 2nd Division was on the outskirts of Courcelette — little more than mounds of rubble — in a matter of hours, but it took another two days to take and secure the place. The Van Doos repulsed fourteen counter-attacks — seven in the first night. 'If hell is as bad as what I have seen at Courcelette,' their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel T.L. Tremblay, wrote in his diary, 'I would not wish my worst enemy to go there.'

Just as the Germans had run out of gas at Ypres in 1915, the British had now run out of tanks, at least for the time being. The 1st Division was brought up on the 2nd's left, to drive another wedge into the German line over the almost imperceptible Thiepval Ridge. The Zollern *Graben*, or Trench, Hessian Trench, and Regina Trench with its branching Kenora Trench — codenames for Canadian objectives — became legendary memories among the survivors of those who took them; and then lost them again!

Currie told Odlum (who was now commanding the 11th Brigade) that, 'I saw one of the wounded wearing a German officer's helmet.'

> *He had been shot through the nose but he didn't mind a little thing like that. The officer [had] turned to run and he let him have about four inches of steel in the kidney and then appropriated the helmet.*

The strength of the 3rd Divison fell to three-and-a-half thousand, out of an establishment of twelve thousand; the 1st Division's 3rd Brigade alone lost three thousand men; and one battalion that received three hundred and fifty replacements in a month could still only muster one hundred and fifty against an establishment of eight hundred at the end of that time. Understandably, morale sagged among the less imperturbable and discipline began to break down. 'Battle stops' had to be introduced, manned by military policemen with orders to arrest anyone trying to leave the battlefield unless they had orders to do so or were wounded.

But most men bottled up their fears and fought long and hard for each square metre of Somme mud. A worried Byng ordered an inquiry into the subsequent loss of Regina Trench, after part of it had been taken on October 8, 1916. Two days later Arthur Currie explained that he had 'personally conducted a further investigation, interviewing all surviving unwounded officers ... as well as a great many N[on] C[ommissioned] O[fficer]s and men.'

> *I found many NCOs who said they had been shown a map, yet they could not recognize mine. Maps are very useful things, yet this Battalion attempted to do too much from the map. If their objectives had been laid out on the ground and maps examined and explained in conjunction with these Practice Trenches, the men would have advanced to the attack with a much clearer idea of their task....*
>
> *Lieut. Simmie, the [4th] Battalion Bombing Officer, had come forward, contrary to orders, and ... had a continuous fight for hours.... He kept calling for bombs [i.e., hand grenades] continuously....*
>
> *Simmie fought his block until his bombs gave out. He was twice wounded and took up the fight with a rifle.... All the officers of C Company were wounded before the retirement.*
>
> *C Company attacked about 100 strong and had 68 casualties. D Company, the left assaulting company, suffered considerably ... encountering wire on high stakes about 15 yards wide. Out of 24 men in one Platoon, only 7 got into the REGINA. They came across Germans in old Gun Pits in front of the Trench, taking 10 prisoners there and killing and wounding about 10 more.... A Company, 3rd Battalion, put in a block in REGINA near Below [Trench] and resisted as long as bombs held out. Lieut. Chatterton headed 2 unsuccessful bayonet attacks....*
>
> *I went carefully into the number of bombs taken over. The 3rd Battalion carried across 3,800 bombs and 480 more were sent over about 8.30 a.m. There was a lull then and 20 men took over 24 each. 12 of these Carriers became casualties coming back. 8 other men took over 30 each but 5 were killed. When Carriers suffer a loss of 60 % of their numbers I think one can say the attempt to replenish the bomb supply was determined.*
>
> *...there is evidence that men used their rifles as clubs, they did not give up as long as bombs were available, and those in the Support REGINA Trench until they were nearly cut off. 15 officers went over in the attack, 4 were killed while 8 were wounded, and all these before the Battalion was driven back.*
>
> *I cannot excuse the Battalion for the lack of clearness in its Operation Orders, for the fact that it never rehearsed its task, nor gave sufficient explanation to the men. ...yet had none of these things occurred, the wire would still have been uncut and the supply of bombs would have run out just as soon.*
>
> *All the lessons to be learned from these operations, all the points, and they are many, which can be improved, all the things left undone, done badly, or which might have been done better, I shall take up not only with the 3rd and 4th Battalions, but with all the Battalions of this Division.*

Slowly, painfully, the 2nd Division pushed forward another kilometre, on to the Ancre Heights. In the British divisions, in each successive attack the unfortunate first wave was destined for the ultimate objective, with the others being expected to 'mop-up' behind them. There was no concept of leap-frogging companies or battalions or brigades through each other; and if by some gallant effort the objective was reached, then all the survivors were expected to consolidate on the new position and hold it until reliefs could be brought up.

This was standard doctrine, and the Canadians (excepting Sam Hughes, who was, of course, busy politicking in Ottawa!) still had an unhealthy respect for people they believed to be genuine professionals. 'As a subordinate commander in a large army,' thrust into someone else's battle on short notice, Byng could do little to influence events. As his biographer has observed, 'assigned a very narrow front, he had no choice but to assault directly the objectives he was given.'

> *Even the formation in which his infantry advanced was imposed [from above], as was the pattern and scale of his artillery fire. He could but allot objectives to his divisional commanders, coordinate their plans and spur them on....*
>
> *Outwardly he remained the confident, cheerful, hard-driving commander. The only obvious sign of his disquiet was the amount of time he spent in reflection. During the Somme campaign Canadian Corps headquarters was at Contay, where, in the grounds of the old château, Byng might often be seen bare-headed, pacing back and forth, absorbed in thought ....*

On 10 October, the 4th Division arrived from the Ypres Salient, where it had been apprenticing for the past two months. The rest of the Corps (except for its artillery which was still needed) was withdrawn into reserve, and the 4th put temporarily under the command of a British corps. In what proved to be the last Canadian action on the Somme, these fresh, un-battle-wearied Canadians finally re-captured Regina Trench and pushed past it another five hundred metres to Desire Trench — bitterly contested lines which were virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding mud when they finally fell and the onset of winter rains compelled the generals to bring their campaign to a stop on 18 November.

When the battle ended the British had lost four hundred and twenty thousand men, the French about two hundred thousand, the Germans about the same as the British and French combined. Canadian casualties numbered twenty-four thousand, 31% of those engaged. 'The three main objectives with which we had commenced our offensive in July had already been achieved,' wrote Sir Douglas Haig in his despatch. '...Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down. Any one of these three results is in itself sufficient to justify the Somme battle.'

CHAPTER II

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THE PATH TO VIMY RIDGE

When the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions left the Somme in mid-October 1916, all their artillery remained with the 4th Division to carry on the fight for another month: and the day before the 4th was finally withdrawn one of the 1st Division's gunners still with it, G.L. Magann, noted in his diary that, 'There is news that we may soon be relieved and rejoin our division on the Vimy Ridge, near Bethune. This would be a very decent place to spend the winter, if the winter is going to be quiet like last winter.'

The Canadians would spend the winter below Vimy Ridge, not on it, but operationally it would be a quiet time, with the Corps holding a sixteen-kilometre stretch of front while each division in turn came out of the line for rest, recuperation and training. Typically, a rifleman would spend four or five days standing guard — and scratching himself! — in the interminable mud and filth of the front line, with only cold or lukewarm food to share with the ubiquitous rats and a nook in the trench wall to doze in. Then four or five days more in support (two warm meals, and an earthen dug-out with corrugated iron roof if he was lucky), followed by a week to ten days in battalion reserve, with regular meals and perhaps a half-decent shanty of wood and iron sheeting to keep out the rain.

In brigade reserve the whole battalion would be pulled back beyond field artillery range to eat and sleep in damaged and deserted farmsteads or the cellars of wrecked and ruined villages. Working parties, carrying supplies forward or repairing reserve trenches each night, kept the soldier busy (and tired) but there was the chance of a bath and an opportunity to exchange his dirty shirt and underpants for clean ones. There would still be 'chats', or lice, in the seams of his uniform, and many off-duty hours were spent 'chatting' and gossiping with his mates.

When the whole division passed into reserve, beyond reach of the enemy's heaviest guns, there might even be the opportunity to get de-loused. There were drill parades and fatigues, as well as weapon training, but his evenings and nights would be largely his own and he could rely upon two hot meals a day and might even find himself really clean, with nothing to scratch, for the moment.

HIRINGS AND FIRINGS

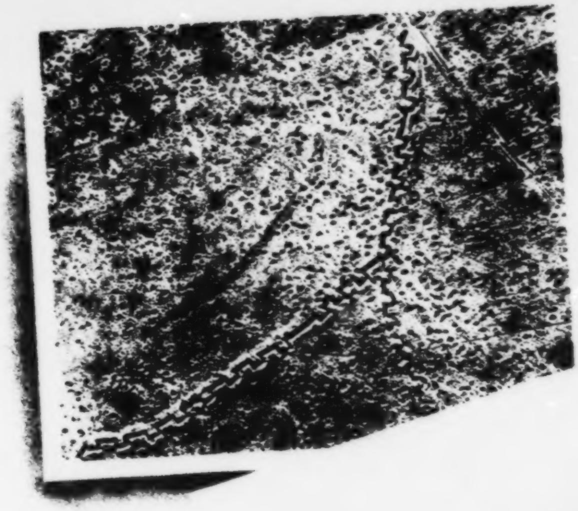
The Somme fighting had revealed much that needed to be done to make the Corps a more efficient fighting machine, and from both organizational and training perspectives the winter would be anything but quiet. One of the problems that had beset the Canadians throughout the first year of their corps' existence had been the wildly uneven calibre of its officers. Sam Hughes, the manic Minister of Militia, was convinced that amateurs like himself made better fighting soldiers than professionals and that he, personally, was uniquely qualified to organize and supervise Canada's war efforts.

He had frequently used that conviction, in his rough-and-tumble, hard-driving way, to justify interference in military matters which were properly outside the minister's sphere of authority. It had certainly been his business, for example, to appoint the initial commanders of the CEF, and some of his *protégés*, like Arthur Currie and Victor Odlum, were proving more than competent at their new trade, although many others were not; subsequent appointments and promotions should have been left to the appropriate commanders, however, particularly where men's lives were likely to be directly at stake, as was the case in France.

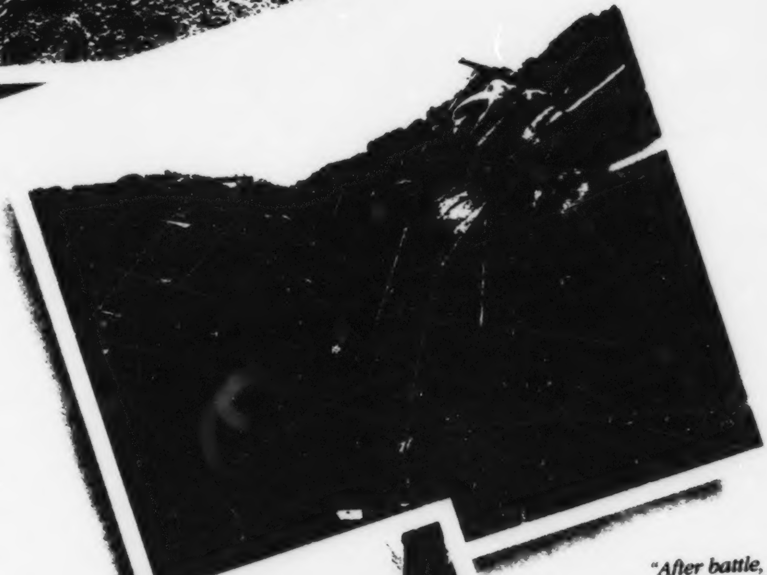
Instead, Hughes had continually interfered on the basis of his own, often bizarre, political whims and military fancies. 'I found it difficult at first, as politics seemed to play such a part,' recalled Major-General Sir Charles Harington, the mild-mannered Briton appointed to be Alderson's chief of staff in the embryonic Canadian Corps. 'Sir Sam Hughes sent instructions from Canada as regards the Command of Brigades, etc.'

He sent instructions about virtually everything else as well, and he lacked all appreciation for, or understanding of, the need for bureaucratic order. His duplication of appointments, made on no comprehensible basis in the first place, created profound jealousies within the Overseas Forces and brought confusion and crisis in their wake. And his belief in himself and his own exquisite judgement was only exaggerated by the award (on Borden's recommendation) of a knighthood and his subsequent promotion (through his own political manipulations) to an honorary lieutenant-generalcy by the British in October 1916.

As Sir Sam he got worse, not better. In a last attempt to bring order out of chaos, the Prime Minister sought to set up an Overseas Ministry in London headed by a man, other than Hughes, holding Cabinet rank and directly responsible to the Cabinet in Ottawa. Hughes, busily inspecting overseas camps at the time (and, at the age of sixty-three, condescending to teach a little unarmed combat on the side) totally ignored Borden's wishes and set up



The bleak junction of Regina and Kenora trenches, where 4th Canadian Division fought the last of the Somme battles. The way in which trenches were dug, with unending crenellations, so that if the enmy broke into one he would have no field of fire along it, can be seen very clearly in this photograph. [NAC C14151]



"After battle, sleep is best; after noise, tranquillity." -William Morris. [DND DHist-6]

Lunchtime in support, on one of those rare days when the sun was shining and all seemed well in a soldier's world. [NAC PA 166]

These ruined gun positions with their corrugated iron roofs could still provide accepiable quarters for troops in immediate reserve. [NAC PA 94]

his own Sub-Militia Council, filled with his own toadies, that would report only to him as Minister of Militia.

Borden was most reluctant to dismiss him out of hand, since he had powerful supporters in the Conservative party and was a stalwart defender of the CEF's distinct Canadian status. However, while the Canadian Corps was fighting its way into (and out of) Regina Trench and on to the Ancre Heights, an angry exchange of cables and letters criss-crossed the Atlantic. 'You seem actuated by a desire and even an intention to administer your Department as if it were a separate and distinct Government in itself,' Borden told his recalcitrant minister, summoning up the political courage to fire him on 9 November 1916.

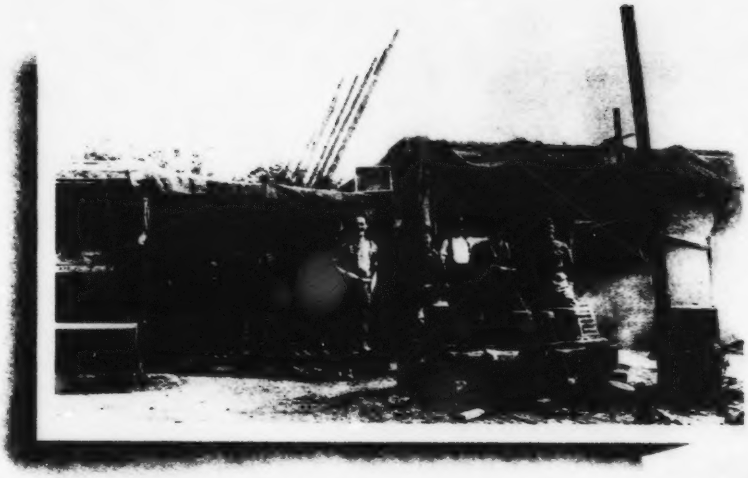
In Ottawa there was both joy and anger. In France, among the fighting men, there was only joy. 'There is a new contentment among us all,' wrote Lieutenant John Creelman, on hearing the news.

> ***We walk with sprightlier step.... The mad mullah of Canada has been deposed. The Canadian Baron Munchausen will be to less effect.... The greatest soldier since Napoleon has gone to his gassy Elba and the greatest block to the successful termination of the war has been removed. Joy, oh Joy! I do not like to kick a man when he is down but I am willing to break nine toes in kicking Sam in the stomach or in the face or anywhere else.***

Another who was no doubt filled with joy was that ambitious (and conventional) bureaucrat, Sir George Perley, Canada's high commissioner in London, now appointed to Cabinet rank as head of the new Overseas Ministry of Canada.

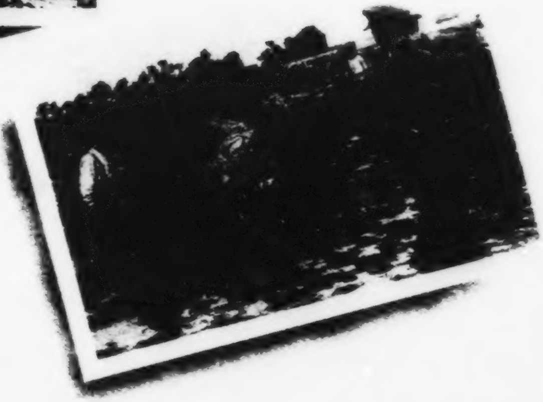
On the greater stage of *Entente* affairs 'Papa' Joffre was gone, his place taken by *Général* Robert Nivelle, whose counter-attacks at Verdun had enjoyed some brief success in the late fall. The meretricious Nivelle, a fluent English speaker, was a much more appealing figure to politicians of similar stripe than the stolid, unilingual Joffre. In Britain, Asquith's coalition government fell in December, to be replaced by an administration led by his former Minister of Munitions, David Lloyd George, another fluent English speaker.

The first step in improving the combat capability of the Canadian Corps had become possible with Borden's dismissal of Hughes. Without reference to either Ottawa or London, Byng could now hire and fire: and between 15 October 1916 and 1 April 1917 one divisional commander (Turner), two brigade commanders and fifteen battalion commanders, were promoted, transferred, or posted out of the Corps.



A battalion cook-house. [NAC PA 20]

"The greatest soldier since Napoleon"? Sam Hughes interrupts bayonet training to offer a pointer on unarmed combat. [NAC PA 596]



It is hard to believe that, on merit, two of the twelve Canadian infantry brigades (and later a division) deserved to be commanded by Hughes's. But Sir Sam appointed his son, Garnet, to command of the embryonic 5th Division and his younger brother, William St Pierre Hughes, to a brigade. [NAC PA 698]

At least Sam Hughes looked the part. Sir George Perley, appointed Minister of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada in November 1916, cuts a ridiculous battlefield figure while visiting the Canadian Corps. [NAC PA 1770]

Those who were promoted had all shown their worth on the Somme, and other officers who had done well took the places of those who were posted out. Overall, Turner had proved to be mediocre rather than bad; but with a Canadian military commander now urgently needed in England he was the obvious choice as the senior major-general overseas and Byng was glad to see him go. The 2nd Division was given to Major-General H.E. Burstall, a Permanent Force officer who had been commanding the Corps artillery, while a distinguished Boer War veteran, long-time journalist, (and another of Hughes' better choices) Brigadier-General E.W.B. Morrison, was promoted to take Burstall's place.

TRAINING THE CORPS

Nivelle's late successes at Verdun had greatly impressed Haig, and, at his bidding, in January 1917 a number of senior officers were despatched to the scene in order to discover what the French had done differently. Byng nominated Currie to represent the Canadian Corps, and 'Old Guts and Gaiters' (as his men ribaldly labelled him) returned from Verdun with some interesting observations and suggestions.

'Every man saw the ground over which he would have to attack; his objective was pointed out to him, as well as the places where he might expect resistance and check.' Then, he reported, the assault troops were withdrawn from the front line and second-rate formations were brought in to do the necessary pre-attack manual labour. Those who were to attack should come fresh to the slaughter.

Currie noted particularly that the objectives assigned to the attackers by the French were 'a line of tactical points', or militarily significant natural features of the ground such as a ridge, stream or knoll. Among the British and Canadians, he recalled, too often 'our objectives are hostile German trenches,' which were likely to have been rendered unrecognizable by the accompanying bombardment.

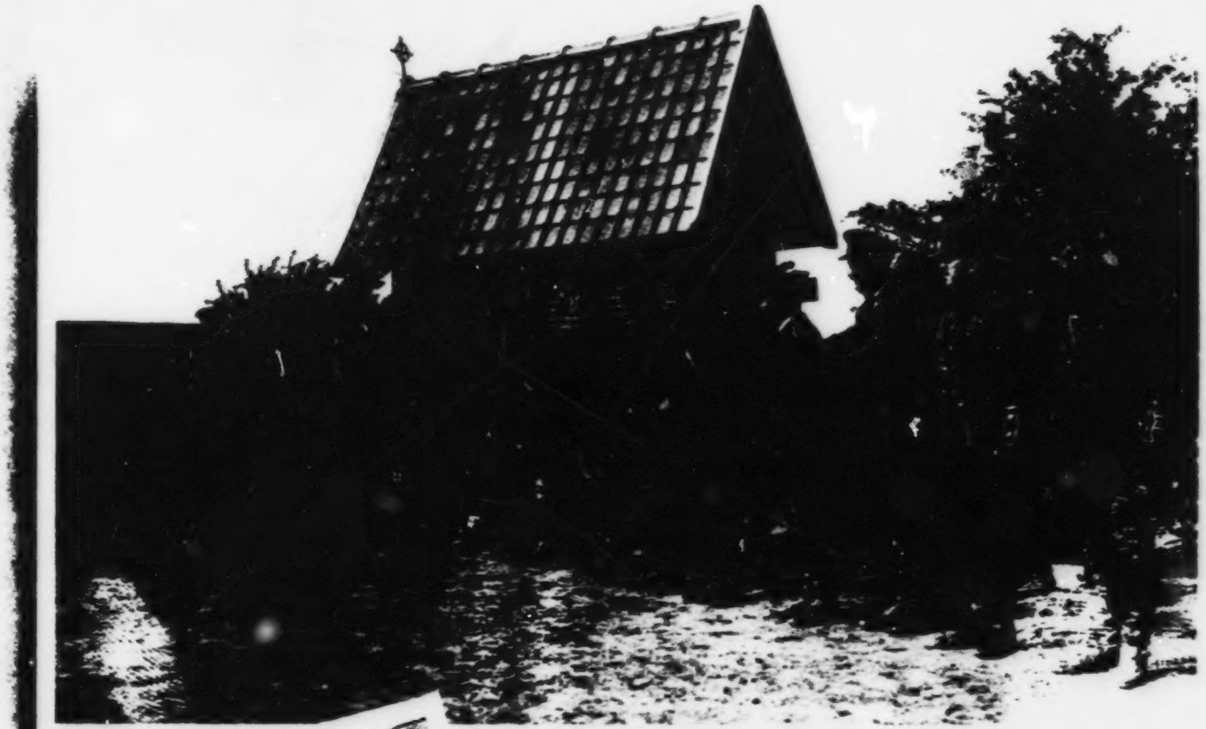
The need for better platoon and company training, he added, was 'the greatest lesson I have learned from my visit to Verdun.'

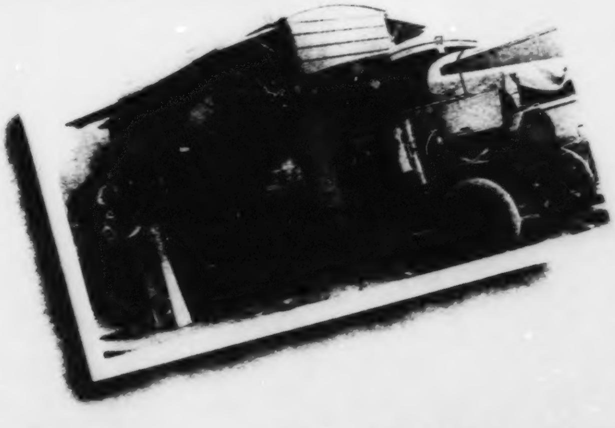
> *The Divisions selected for the attack were trained especially for the work they had to do. The training was carried out on ground as similar to the area over which they would have to attack as it was possible to find. All the training consisted of platoon and company training.*

Byng promptly started a program to implement Currie's proposals. The Canadians were not alone, or even necessarily the leaders, in this reformation, however. It was occurring more or less simultaneously throughout much of the British Expeditionary Force, where there was a general

Major-General Henry Burstall, a Quebec-born Permanent Force gunner who succeeded General Turner in command of the 2nd Division in December 1916, and retained that command until the end of the war. [NAC PA 2276]

Canadian Corps staff officers being presented to the King: left to right, Burstall, Byng, King George V, Farmar, Lindsey, Currie (A.C., not A.W.), Radcliffe, Foster, Brooke, Rennie, Ketchen, Thacker, Webber, Frith, Kearsley, Hill, Elmsley, Hayter, MacBrien. The fact that the Canadian Corps was maintained as a distinct national formation meant that these officers spent many months working together - and became an efficient team as a result. [NAC PA 582]





Armourers repairing rifles and machine-guns in a mobile workshop conveniently situated beside the light railway leading to the front. [NAC PA 1272]

A repair car in the divisional ammunition park. Notice the chain-operated transmission and solid-tired wheels. [NAC PA 16] recognition that another Pyrrhic victory like the last one might well destroy the army.

But British divisions were continually being shuffled about within their various corps formations for reasons of immediate military convenience; and that was a habit they could not, or would not, break, so that there was no standardization or continuity in their armies, above the divisional level. The four Canadian divisons, on the other hand, would be (with only very rare and brief exceptions) held together in the one Corps for the remainder of the war: and other things being equal, a corps consisting of divisions trained by different criteria to differing standards was not likely to do as well in battle as one with divisions boasting a common interpretation of doctrine and similar standards of training.

Moreover, because the Canadians were kept together, their divisional and corps staffs came to know each others' strengths and weaknesses very well, and that made for better, more effective and more error-free performance all around.*

Meanwhile, the Corps looked at the way in which its fighting strength was arrayed. In two years of trench warfare some curious shifts had occurred in the internal establishment of the British (and Canadian) infantry battalion, which, of necessity, now carried almost exclusively the human weight of battle. Whereas the pre-war battalion, organized to fight 'colonial' wars on a company basis, had been composed almost entirely of riflemen with just a sprinkling of machine-gunners, pioneers and signallers, by the time of the Somme battles nearly half of the battalion's manpower was composed of specialists of one kind or another - bombers, scouts, snipers, signallers, machine-gunners, etc.

Many of these men were organized in specialist companies or platoons, with their own specialist officers — and that had allowed the traditional British emphasis on hierarchy and 'status' to come into play. Internal rivalries had arisen, and a sort of class-consciousness come to exist, in which the ordinary riflemen were seen (by the specialists) as the lowest of the low. Without any deliberate intent, that essential willing and close co-operation between specialist and rifleman had become the exception rather than the rule.

One of the lessons of the Somme had been that the largest group that could be controlled effectively by

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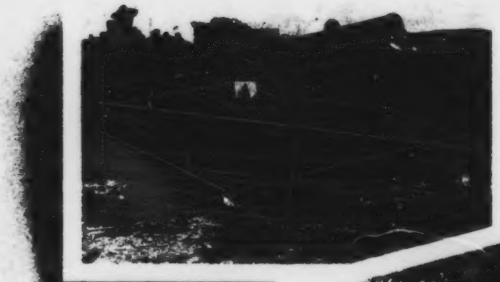
* **The Australians, who also had a corps in France by this time, were much less 'nationalistic' than the Canadians. They frequently permitted their divisions to be attached to other formations, sometimes for prolonged periods, and consequently suffered from the same variations in divisional standards as the British; with a similar lack of co-ordination between their own corps and divisional staffs. They fought as well as the Canadians, however.**

Not a field gun, but a field kitchen with the stovepipe lowered for towing. [NAC PA 888]



Horse-drawn field kitchens, with stovepipes raised, ready for business. [NAC PA 9]

A heavy howitzer on counter-battery work. [NAC PA 697]

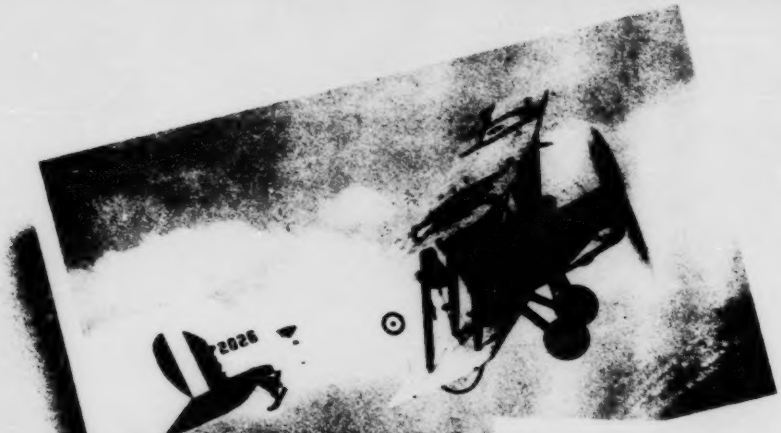
Counter-battery fire could be corrected by aerial observation from aircraft (by radio) or tethered balloons (by telephone). A "balloonatic" checks his telephone before ascending. [NAC PA 2057] one man in the all-pervading fog of battle was a platoon-sized one — thirty-five to forty men — consisting of four rifle sections. Sometimes a thoughtful battalion or company commander might add to a particular platoon one of the twelve Lewis guns which came under their control, but more often than not all the specialists were held back. Then an infantry platoon would have virtually none of the weaponry, and consequent tactical flexibility, needed to meet the peculiarities of trench fighting. The subaltern commanding it would often find his little group isolated — as had happened more than once at Regina Trench — and, with little prospect of specialist reinforcements to deal with the exigencies of the situation, would have to withdraw at best, or go down fighting at worst.

To overcome this problem, on 9 December 1916 the Canadian Corps led the way (six weeks in advance of a comparable directive from Haig's General Headquarters) in implementing a new battalion organization which made the platoon into a more balanced combat entity. Henceforth, each platoon would consist of rifle, rifle-grenade, bombing and Lewis gun sections, and so become a tactical unit capable of taking or holding ground with its own resources to a previously unparalleled extent.

What was the best way to close with the enemy? Clearly, there was no future in the straight-as-possible, evenly-spaced lines, five or ten metres apart, that had proved so vulnerable on the Somme. Instead, the leading companies of a battalion would advance in two much rougher lines of uncertain spacing (dependent upon the ground and the nature of the opposition), grouped by platoons, with the lines fifteen to twenty metres apart, and a third line, twice that distance behind and even looser in formation, assigned to mop-up any enemy trapped in bunkers or dug-outs.

Fifty to a hundred metres behind the third line would come the 'follow up' battalions, still grouped by platoons but with their sections usually deployed in a diamond-shaped formation that, while less efficient in bringing their own firepower to bear, reduced the effectiveness of enemy machine-gun and artillery fire. That also enabled the young subalterns commanding the platoons to exercise better control over their men.

Then there was the question of heavy machine-guns, whose tactical importance seemed to increase with every engagement. Before the war, a British division had carried twenty-four such guns (two per battalion) on its strength, but each of the four divisions of the Canadian Corps now had sixty-four. Machine-gun tactics, however, had not kept pace with numbers. Ever since their



A two-seater BE2C, widely used by the corps squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps for ground liaison duties on the Western Front in 1916 and early 1917. [DND HC 5017]

Raymond Collishaw and Arthur Whealy, Canadian fighter pilots of the Royal Naval Air Service who joined 22 (Army) Wing on the Western Front in February 1917. Both survived the war, Collishaw with sixty victories and Whealy with twenty-seven. [DND 0-2855]

The "Red Baron", Manfred von Richthofen (with white scarf). When he was killed, on 21 April 1918, von Richthofen had been credited with eighty aerial victories. [DND AH 165]

Thélus, the objective of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade on 9 April 1917, photographed from the air two weeks earlier. [NAC C55267] introduction in the 1880s, they had been generally viewed as direct-fire, defensive weapons (which was really all that the light machine-gun was useful for), and that was still the common perception among soldiers.

Little or no consideration had been given to the potential for offensive warfare inherent in the heavier types. One officer who had thought about it was a Frenchman in the Canadian Corps (he had been an engineering entrepreneur in Calgary before the war) named Raymond Brutinel. Appointed to command the four-battery 1st Canadian Motor Machine-Gun Brigade, a small mechanized force of heavy machine-guns wielding relatively immense firepower, Brutinel had been experimenting with the idea of indirect barrage fire in the attack — curtains of bullets which would compel front-line defenders to keep their heads down until the last minute. Aimed at areas, or firing on fixed lines, they could also be used to harass the enemy by night.

He was now promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and appointed Corps Machine-Gun Officer to co-ordinate their use and develop a uniform tactical doctrine. By the beginning of March, he had organized a harassing fire plan to supplement that of the artillery, targeting his weapons on damaged wire entanglements (to restrict repairs by night), communication trenches, tramways and dumps to hinder re-supply, and the enemy's closer field artillery batteries. Up to sixty-four guns were continuously employed by day and night, and prisoners reported that their fire was having a pronounced effect on German morale.

In the artillery, the introduction of the 'instantaneous' 106 fuze meant that instead of exploding in the air or ground shells would now blow up in the wire. With that problem more or less solved, the gunners began to pay more attention to the destruction of enemy artillery, or counter-battery fire. A young militia soldier-scientist from McGill University, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton, had been appointed Counter-Battery Staff Officer at Corps headquarters at the end of January and, like Currie, he was sent off to see how the French did it. He came back much less impressed with them than Currie had been. At their headquarters, he found, 'you had the most wonderful dissertation on the co-ordination of artillery fire and how they had won the last battle.'

> *Then you'd get out in the field and you'd find that the French, just as we found them always, were a damned sloppy outfit as far as their artillery was concerned. Their stuff was tied together with binder twine and string and hay wire. They'd put on bursts of fire, but the idea of accuracy [essential to counter-battery work] simply was not there.*

> *The lesson one learned was negative, of what not to do, and we also learned that it's a damned good thing that those who were running the higher stuff should know exactly what was going on in the field and not be full of fancies.*

McNaughton was a perfectionist — an essential quality for effective counter-battery work. He took his technical lead from soldiers like V Corps' Lieutenant-Colonel A.G. Haig (no relation of Sir Douglas) and scientists such as Lawrence Bragg, the twenty-five-year-old Nobel Prize winner for physics in 1915 who had been commissioned and brought to the Western Front specifically to improve British gunnery.

THE AIR ARM

Good gunnery was predicated on good observation, calculation and analysis; and since the Germans generally held the higher ground on the Western Front — certainly in the case of Vimy Ridge — a good view of the German rear areas, where their heavy batteries were situated, was best achieved from the air. Sometimes from captive balloons, with two observers slung in a basket underneath, more often from two-seater 'corps' aeroplanes.

In 1916-1917 there was no Canadian air force. Sam Hughes had created one in 1914 but, like so many of his schemes, it had been a bungled afffair and died an inconspicuous and ignominious death somewhere on Salisbury Plain. Meanwhile, Canadians in their hundreds had been — and still were — joining the British Army's Royal Flying Corps (and the Royal Naval Air Service), some by direct entry and some by transfer from the Canadian Corps.

By the end of 1916 airmen on the Western Front had two major rôles. Charged with attaining and maintaining air superiority, so that German aircraft could not operate over *Entente* lines and their own colleagues of the corps squadrons could go about their duties undisturbed, were the fighter pilots, who were not yet the media heroes they would become. Canadians such as the Bell-Irving brothers from Vancouver, Malcolm McBean and Alan Duncan, had been prominent among them from mid-1915, with future aces such as Raymond Collishaw (of Nanaimo, BC), Roy Brown (Carleton Place, Ontario) and A.W.Carter (Calgary) reaching the front in early 1917. W.A. Bishop, from Owen Sound, Ontario, had spent four months of 1916 on the Western Front as an observer in a corps squadron, then returned to England for pilot training. He would re-appear, as a fighter pilot, in March 1917.

As with the ground forces, the fighter arm of the RFC had learned much from the French experience at Verdun, mostly by way of using squadron formations to settle the question of air superiority. In that respect, however, they were still some way behind the Germans who had begun to adopt formation tactics in early 1916 and, a year later, were now forming *élite* squadrons, *Jägdstaffeln* (often shortened to *Jastas*), to be moved about the front as operational exigencies demanded. The best of them was probably Oswald Boelke's *Jasta 2*, which numbered among its up-and-coming young pilots Manfred, *Freiherr* von Richthofen, soon to be better known as 'the Red Baron.' In April, flying over the Arras front (that included Vimy Ridge), the Red Baron would claim a phenomenal thirty victories.

The more mundane work of aerial reconnaissance and photography, artillery observation and contact patrolling, was done by pilots and observers of the corps squadrons, so-called because one such squadron was allocated to each army corps. No.16 Squadron, with its two-seater BE 2s, was assigned to the Canadian Corps during the winter of 1916-1917 (and would stay with it for the remainder of the war). Canadians tended to concentrate in the fighter squadrons but, typically, there were at least four Canadians flying in No.16 as it went about photographing the otherwise invisible ground behind Vimy Ridge.

By early March, air photos of the German defence system formed the basis of a new map which was continually being brought up to date as enemy dispositions changed. All this was grist to McNaughton's mill, as he combined it with the geometric techniques of ground-based sound ranging and flash spotting to plot the position of more than one hundred and eighty of the two hundred and twelve German batteries deployed behind the Vimy front. But the price paid was often heavy, since in the spring of 1917 the Germans held the edge in the air both tactically and technologically. Only numerically was the *Entente* superior.

Letters and diaries of the men in the trenches at the time are filled with references to the air battle. 'I have seen dozens of fights in the air in the last three weeks,' wrote Lieutenant Clifford Wells, a Montreal minister's son serving the the 8th Battalion, on 26 March.*

> *It is a beautiful sight to see the planes manoeuvring in the air like two hawks, and to hear the puff, puff, puff of their machine-guns, the sound of which is softened by distance. Each plane tries to get above the other, so as to swoop down upon it.... Often I have seen a plane — British, French, or German — engaged in taking photographs or observing artillery fire suddenly brought down by a hostile plane which swooped down on it out of the*

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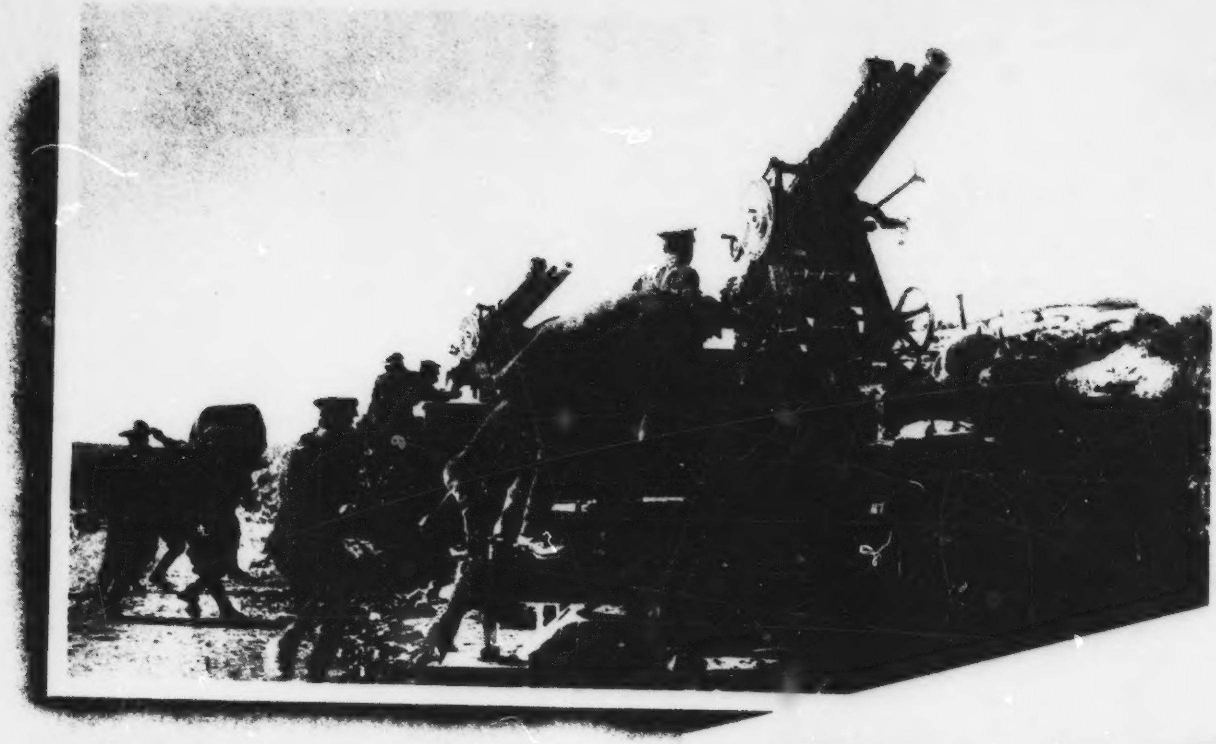
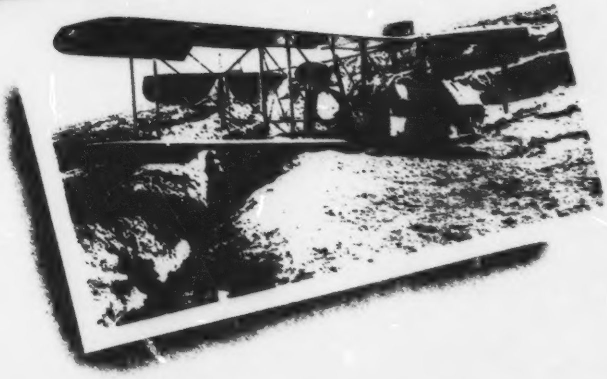
* Wells would be killed in action a month and two days after writing this letter.

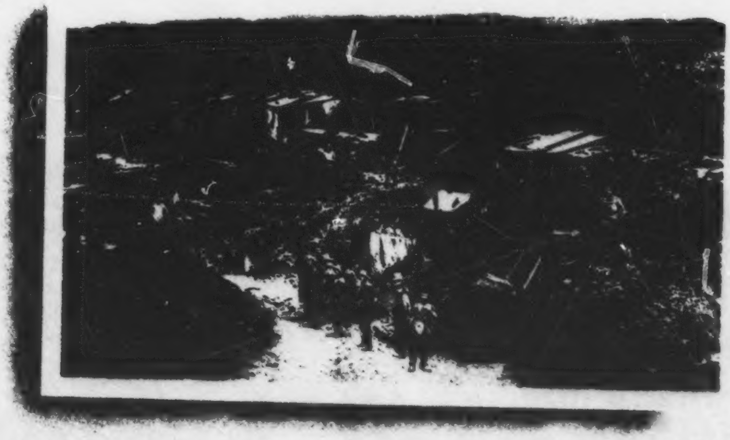


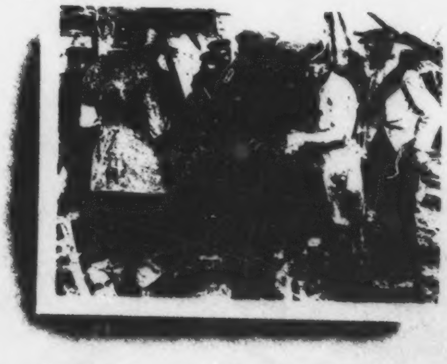
Canadian anti-aircraft gunners prepare for action. [NAC PA 974]



This two-seater seems to have crashed and burned - or did it burn first and then crash? The difference may have been important to the men who flew it without parachutes. [NAC PA 957]

German dug-outs. German quarters behind the line were little different from those of Canadians - but because they usually held the higher ground, their front line dug-outs were usually deeper, better-built, and better drained. [DND DHist-8]





German wounded receiving treatment. [DND DHist-9]

> *clouds. When a German plane comes over our lines — which is comparatively seldom — the anti-aircraft guns open up, and soon the sky is dotted with scores or even hundreds of white puffs of smoke where the shells burst.... I have rarely seen an aeroplane brought down by artillery fire alone. Usually it takes a plane to bring down a plane.*

Airmen were not issued with parachutes, senior RFC commanders holding that possession of such convenient 'escape' devices would only encourage their use! Two days earlier, Gunner Frank Ferguson, a motor-mechanic serving with the 9.2-inch howitzers of the 1st Siege Battery, had watched an artillery observation machine 'shot to pieces', and recorded the event in his diary.

> *With the controls shot away, the pilot made a grand effort to land the ship by crawling out on the tail and trying to balance it on an even keel, but his weight was too great and down went the tail, sticking the nose in the air. He then crawled back into the cockpit to try and level it out again, but it was a losing battle, and with a sickening rush it dove into the ground completely pulverizing the pilot and his observer.*

A NEW GERMAN DOCTRINE

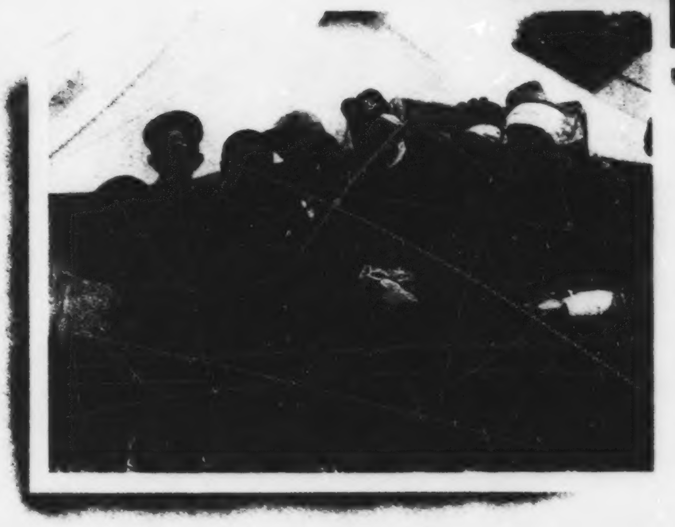
The Germans had been shocked by their casualties on the Somme. At Verdun, as the attackers, they had expected to lose as many men as the French, and von Falkenhayn had based his strategy on simply outlasting his opponents in terms of morale; but a very different result had been expected from the Somme fighting in which the *Entente* had done all the attacking. Conventional wisdom stipulated that defence was the stronger form of warfare, since the defender could choose his ground, prepare it in advance, and fight from cover. Given those advantages his losses should be lighter, but something had gone terribly wrong on the Somme for German losses there had been about as high as those of the British and French, even though they were defending.

In the long term, Ludendorff now knew, that kind of result could only bring eventual defeat since the Central Powers lacked the human and material resources of their opponents. The United States were still neutral, but much American production was going to the British and French and none to the Germans; and should the Americans enter the war (as they looked more like doing every day) then the ultimate balance of power would shift even more in his enemies' favour. Already, mourned Ludendorff, 'in every theatre of war the Entente was able to add to its numerical superiority enormous additional resources in every department of technical supply.'

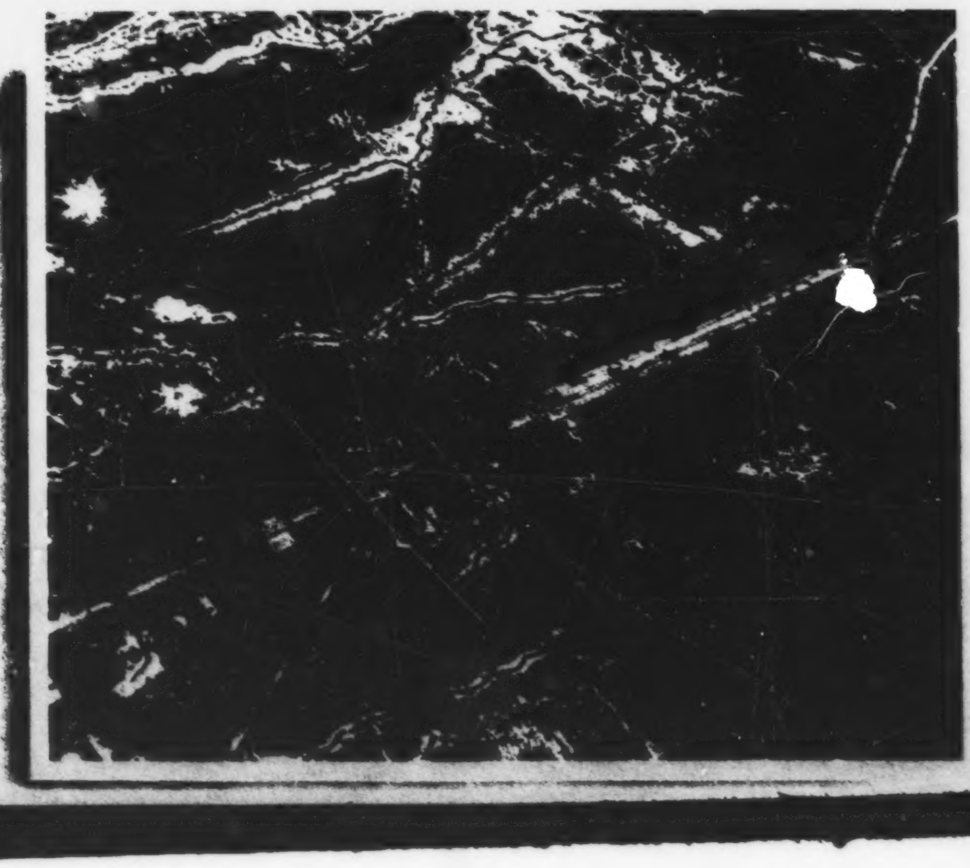
One of the first things that he had done, therefore, on coming to the

A front-line barber shop. Canadian troops were expected to shave every day. [DND PMR 92-002]

Wounded Canadians, no doubt happy to be alive. [NAC PA 813]



Old trench-lines behind the Canadian front and the Arras-Souchez road. Note the extent to which modern armies were coming to rely on motorized transport whenever metalled roads made it practicable. [DND DHist-11]



Rupprecht concluded that 'all signs are pointing to the imminence of the attack in the Arras sector.'

Generaloberst von Falkenhausen had lost none of his confidence, however. His appreciation of the following day was that 'the men seem to be mentally and physically less alert after the strain of the last few days' bombardment, but should be capable of withstanding a major offensive.'

How wrong he was. Twenty-four hours later, Frank Ferguson wrote:

> *— Easter Sunday — During the night 1,420 shells arrived on lorries and all hands are busy washing them and putting them in neat rows. Had to roll them for a while. Then we went to the guns to fire 500 rounds. A swell lot of Christians we are.*

While the guns fired, Jack Harris and ten thousand of his fellow Canadians were filing into the thirteen tunnels (their entrances marked by red and white barber poles) that led to the front line. Another ten thousand were filtering into the front line trenches and old mine craters, some of them no more than fifty metres from the enemy outposts, awaiting the signal that would send them 'over the top'.

Western Front, was to instruct staff officers to try and devise a more economical form of defence. The result pleased him.

> *In sharp contrast to the form of defence hitherto employed, which had been restricted to rigid and easily recognizable lines of defence of little depth, a new system was devised, which, by distribution in depth and the adoption of a loose formation, enabled a more active defence to be maintained. It was of course intended that the position should remain in our hands at the end of the battle, but the infantryman need no longer say to himself: "Here I must stand or fall," but had, on the contrary, the right within certain limits to retire in any direction before strong enemy fire. Any part of the line that was lost was to be recovered by counter-attack.*

Writing *My War Memoirs* in 1919, Ludendorff was addressing himself to the general public and surveying the whole scope of the war. At that level his generalized explanation was probably adequate; but because we are concerned only with what happened on Vimy Ridge, where the unusual topography significantly affected the arrangement of defensive positions, it is necessary to explain this new doctrine in rather more detail.

As expressed in the manual that the German High Command put out at the time, defences should be deep rather than shallow, elastic rather than rigid, based on strong-points rather than continuous trenches (although the latter might still exist).

Consequently, 'the first thing to be constructed along the enemy front is a strongly developed position organized in depth. It will consist of a trench system of a number of continuous non-parallel lines at intervals of about 150 to 200 metres', or a spacing three times that of the old system.

Behind it, at least one other position (for which the same rules applied) was to be established; and the distance between the two positions was to be calculated so that an ememy bombardment of both simultaneously was ruled out. That meant a minimum gap of two or three thousand meters between them.

The front lines should rely more on firepower than manpower, which, of course, meant more machine-guns. 'The framework of all infantry combat lines is constituted by the firing positions of the machine-guns and the defensive bunkers.' Even so, 'the bulk of the defenders (including the machine-guns) is to be kept in the rearward lines, in the intermediary terrain between them, in the communication trenches and in the area behind the first position.'

Ground need not be held on principle. If, to economize in lives, it became necessary to relinquish some ground, then quick counter-attacks, launched without waiting for orders from higher authority, might well recover lost positions before the attackers could consolidate their gains. If these immediate counter-attacks should fail, then 'the only thing that will lead to recapturing the lost ground is a systematically-planned [counter-]attack.'

> *The re-capture of lost position sectors is, however, not always recommended; instead, the importance of the terrain intended for capture must be in proper proportion to the anticipated losses in men, and the ammunition that will have to be expended.*

'Systematically-planned' counter-attacks should be launched by fresh troops, unaffected by the earlier fighting; and to ensure that they really were fresh, they should be held back beyond the range of the enemy's heaviest artillery — which meant that they would usually start from billets several hours' march away from the battlefield.

All along the Western Front in early 1917, German commanders were busy putting these new concepts into effect — except on Vimy Ridge.

VIMY RIDGE

Running across the western edge of the Douai plain, rising to a maximum height of a hundred and ten metres above the surrounding lowlands, Vimy Ridge stretches for eight kilometres along a north-west/south-east axis, just north of Arras. The northern tip rises quite abruptly from the Souchez ravine to a small knoll, known in 1917 as the *Giesslerhöhe* to the Germans and Hill 120, or the Pimple, to the Canadians.

From the Pimple, a high saddle leads to the main mass of the ridge, with its highest point, Hill 145 (that number of metres above sea level, where the Vimy Memorial now stands), two kilometres to the south-east. From Hill 145 the crest slopes down to Hill 135, three-and-a-half kilometres away, widening and flattening as it goes; and then the Ridge drops gently away into the valley of the Scarpe river.

Looked at from the west the ridge rises very gradually from the Arras-Souchez road; but on its north-eastern side it falls away quite precipitously. Before the war the south-western slope had been open farmland, while the crest was largely pastureland (today it is wooded in the north and centre, with open fields on the flattened southern top), but two years of shelling and mining had turned it into a wasteland of craters and mud. The north-eastern slope, however, was still well-wooded.

The ridge had fallen to the Germans in October 1914 and the French had made their first attempt at recovering it in mid-December 1914, when they attacked with six divisions; but the mud had proved too deep, the fog too thick, and the 1st Bavarian Reserve Corps too obstinate. After preliminary operations cost the attackers nearly eight thousand casualties, the main assault was postponed.

In the early summer of 1915, while the Canadians were busy at Festubert and Givenchy, the French had thrown eighteen divisions into their postponed attack — and been repulsed. They had lost more than a hundred thousand men, the Germans about eighty thousand. Nevertheless, in September they tried again, with nine divisions; and the Germans, with eight, — 'fighting as if in a fortress' — still held them off, although the French did capture Souchez and the Pimple, and almost reached the crest of Hill 145, at the cost of another forty thousand casualties.

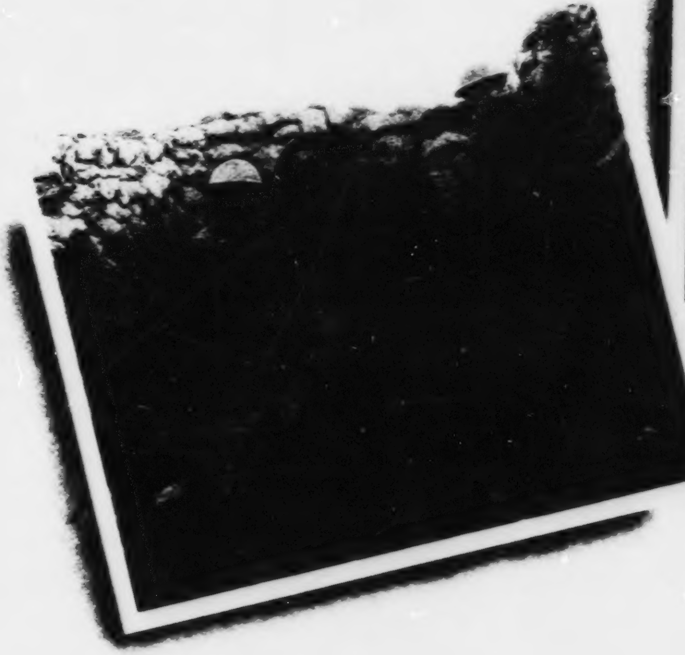
The following February, however, the Germans had recovered the Pimple in a perfectly-executed surprise attack. And after the British had taken over the Vimy sector in early March 1916, another surprise assault had re-captured fifteen hundred metres of their front and support lines on the slopes of Hill 145.

Since then, Briton and German had been industriously extending old tunnels and digging new ones in their attempts to undermine defences that apparently could not be taken by any amount of gallant action above ground. No other part of the Western Front had proved as impregnable as Vimy Ridge, and it seems that the new German doctrine was not implemented there for two relatively, and one absolutely, irrefutable reasons.

- Firstly, the defences had proved more than adequate in the past, and the 1st Bavarian Reserve Corps (commanded by *General* Karl von Fasbender) which was responsible for most of them, was apparently not anxious to make changes. Apart from a few bloody weeks on the Somme, the Bavarians had been there since 1914. They were part of *Generaloberst* von Falkenhausen's Sixth Army; and von Falkenhausen was a seventy-three-year-old conservative, perhaps willing to accept, but certainly not to press, new ideas; while his chief of staff, *Generalmajor Freiherr* von Nagal zu Aichberg, was not the man to push him.

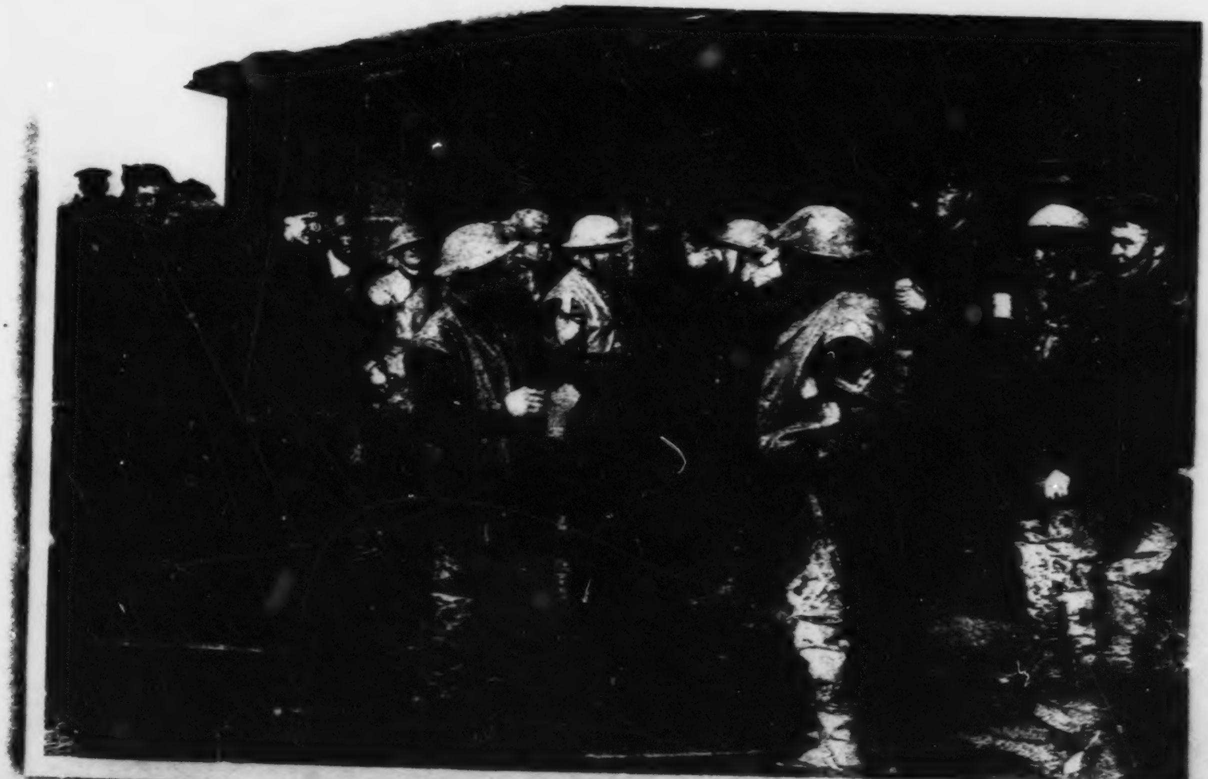
- Secondly, the Bavarians had exercised considerable skill and ingenuity in locating and constructing fortifications which added immensely to the natural strength of the position — but which did not conform to the new principles, since much of the work had been done before the latter had been promulgated. Their

It was essential to keep trenches as dry as possible to guard against the ravages of "trench foot," an affliction much like frostbite, brought about by prolonged exposure to damp and cold. These French-Canadians working to mimimize the damp were with the 22nd Battalion. [NAC PA 396]



The deeper you could dig, the more protection you had. But how Canadian "highlanders" could remain at all comfortable or warm in their mud-caked kilts is a mystery. These soldiers were serving with the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders) from Montreal. [NAC PA 95]

There was mud and water everywhere - even behind the front, where you could find hot coffee. [NAC PA 926]



value would be minimized if major tactical changes were instituted.

- Thirdly, and irrefutably, the unusual nature of the ground — particularly that steep north-eastern face of the ridge — made it impracticable to implement the new doctrine properly. The northern part of the ridge was simply too narrow to build the deeper first position as recommended; and if the enemy should reach the eastern edge of the crest, then the second position, on the plain below, would be entirely exposed to fire from guns sited safely beyond the crest.

Moreover, any kind of counter-attack up its steep eastern face, whether immediate or systematically-planned, was likely to be suicidal. Perhaps that was why the two reserve divisions intended in theory for that purpose were held much further back than usual, six hours' marching away, beyond the range of artillery fire from the crest.

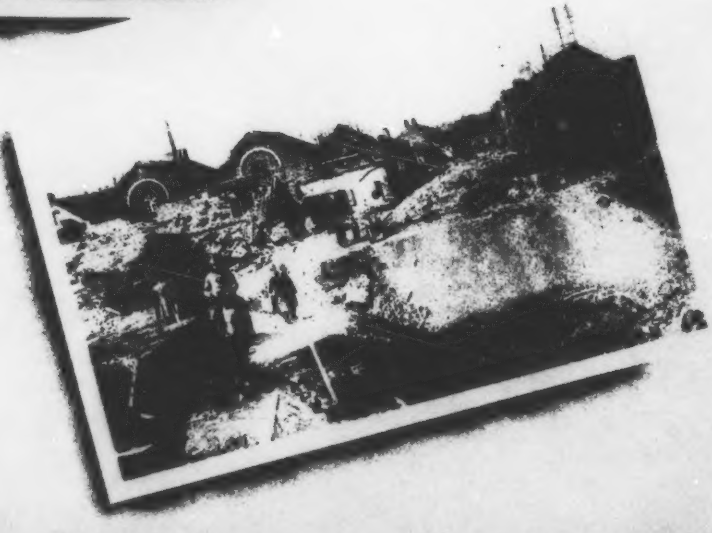
Good soldiers all, von Fassbender's men nevertheless went through the motions. Because the opposing front lines ran almost due north and south, while the ridge angled to the south-east, the second position began fifteen hundred metres behind the first at the southern end, and twice that distance behind the higher, steeper, northern end. But, apparently because of the utter futility of well developed on it, the second positon was never as heavily manned as it should have been.

Consequently, as winter moved into spring, *Gruppe* Vimy (the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and 79th Reserve Division, constituting the 1st Bavarian Reserve Corps) and the southern wing of *Gruppe* Souchez (16th Bavarian Division), sat tight in their linear, shallow, well-fortified positions, unwilling and virtually unable to modify their stances in accordance with the new doctrine, and trusting that their ground could be held in the old, officially-discredited, way.

These divisions had, between them, five regiments (a German regiment of three battalions was equivalent to a Canadian brigade) garrisoning the Ridge; and each regiment held its portion of the first position with two understrength battalions, while the third manned the second position. There would be approximately seven thousand Germans available to oppose any initial assault, with a possible reinforcement of two-and-a-half thousand more to meet the 'follow-up' forces close behind — no more than ten thousand men altogether. When the time came, the Canadians would attack them with about thirty-five thousand.

In a stark but dignified ceremony, a Canadian officer is buried in a temporary grave. Later, his remains would be transferred to an official war cemetery - one of those still immaculately maintained today by the Imperial War Graves Commission. [NAC PA 652]

Waiting for the battle. Their rifles stacked in a bay to the left of the picture, infantrymen rest (and, in most cases, try to sleep) in the front line. [DND 0-2533]



As they moved east in the course of their great voluntary withdrawal, Fall Alberich, the Germans destroyed as much as they could. In this case, a mine has been exploded at a crossroads in the town of Ham. French troops, following up, examine the damage (and a photographer is at work, right centre, recording the extent of it.) [NAC PA 4339]

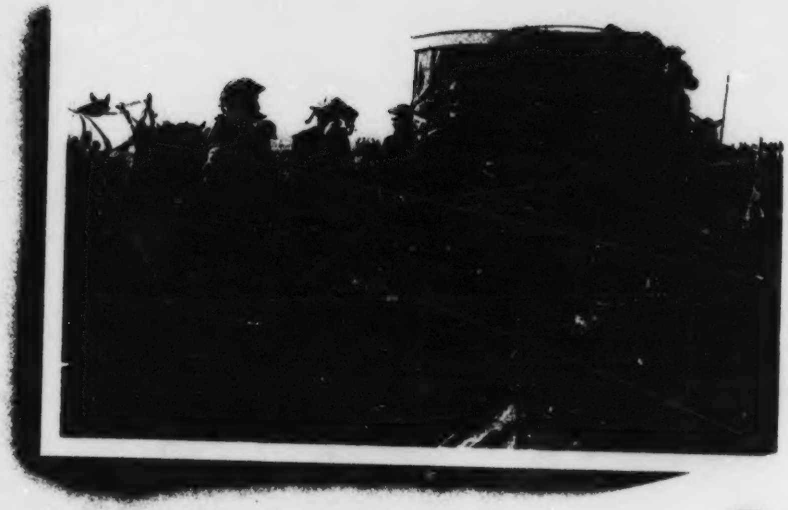
STRATEGIC PLANS AND SURPRISES

At the Chantilly Conference held in November 1916, Joffre and Haig had optimistically agreed that their object would be 'the endowment of the campaigns of 1917 with a decisive character'; and, to that end, they would 'be ready to undertake general offensives from the first fortnight of February 1917 with all the means at their disposal.' Promptly, Joffre had begun to make plans for a continuation of the Battle of the Somme on a wider front.

His December replacement by Nivelle led to radical changes, however, as the latter confidently (over-confidently, in the light of subsequent events) plotted the total destruction of the German armies in the west rather than the battle of attrition that Joffre had visualized. German forces were to be pinned down in other sectors while an *attaque brusquée* (by a force totalling forty-six divisions, half of them for the initial assault and the other half to exploit that success) was launched over the Chemin des Dames, the southern shoulder of the great German salient that extended north from Soissons to Arras. Nivelle would first break a hole in the German line and then drive northward, along a chord of the salient, thus cutting off whole German armies from their supplies.

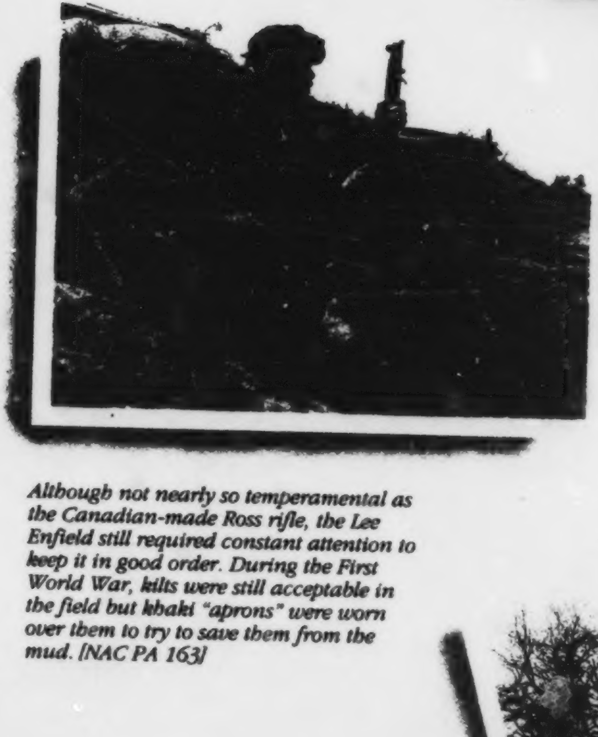
On the northern rim of the salient, a second French attack, to be mounted in conjunction with a British thrust before the main attack began, would drive on Cambrai. The northern shoulder was buttressed by Vimy Ridge, and on the ground immediately to the south of it, along the Scarpe river, the British Third Army would launch its push towards Cambrai. These two diversionary assaults, creating a kind of small-scale pincer movement, were primarily intended to draw German reserves away from the Chemin des Dames before Nivelle made his decisive move; but there was a distinct hope (at least on the part of the British) that they would be eminently successful in their own right.

All these exciting plans were set in some disarray by an enemy who moved first. As soon as he had arrived on the Western Front, Ludendorff had ordered the construction of a reserve line (named the Siegfried *Stellung* by the Germans and the Hindenburg Line by the British) along a chord of the salient, to counter any unexpected *Entente* successes. Its existence would also enable him to evacuate the salient without upsetting the overall arrangement of his defences, should he ever wish to do so. In *Fall Alberich*, the aptly-codenamed (after the malicious dwarf of the *Nibelung* saga) preparation for that, the Germans laid waste to the whole area between the two lines,



Casualties were a regular, daily misfortune, not restricted to the great offensives of the war. [NAC PA 852]

An army not only marches on its stomach - it attacks on it too. [NAC PA 255]



Although not nearly so temperamental as the Canadian-made Ross rifle, the Lee Enfield still required constant attention to keep it in good order. During the First World War, kilts were still acceptable in the field but khaki "aprons" were worn over them to try to save them from the mud. [NAC PA 163]

These men are waiting for dark before moving up to the front and carrying out a raid on the enemy's trenches. Trench raids were meant to gather information and prisoners - and maintain the offensive spirit. [NAC PA 906] destroying roads, bridges, railways and buildings.

French security was poor, and the forthcoming offensives widely talked about. In mid-March, Ludendorff did indeed order a general withdrawal (averaging more than thirty kilometres in depth) to the Siegfried *Stellung*, reducing the length of his front between Arras and Soissons by a third at one stroke, adding thirteen divisions to his reserves, and vastly reducing Nivelle's prospects. Since his chosen ground, the Chemin des Dames, lay east of Soissons, the change would not effect the initial attack, but the prospect of developing it into a decisive victory vanished with the evacuation of the salient.

The implementation of *Alberich*, moreover, completely upset the prospects of the French attack in the north and compelled the British to alter their plans accordingly. Instead of Anglo-French pincers closing on Cambrai, Sir Edmund Allenby's Third Army must try to advance on that objective alone, on a fourteen kilometre-wide front down the valley of the Scarpe. The French, struggling through the empty wasteland of the former salient, would guard Allenby's southern flank, and Sir Henry Horne's First Army — which included the Canadian Corps — would be responsible for the northern side.

Preparations which had started in January were intensified. In material terms there was much to be done. The Corps could muster two hundred and fifty heavy guns and howitzers (one for every twenty metres of frontage) and more than six hundred field guns and lighter howitzers.* Nearly two-and-a-half thousand tonnes of ammunition were required each day for the harassing and counter-battery fire which went on throughout the preparatory stages of the operation, rising gradually towards a crescendo, while forty-two thousand tonnes were stored behind the gun lines, to be fired during the attack.

To move all this ammuniton, three miles of new tramway were constructed, and the existing twenty miles partly reconstructed. Plank roads were built — and re-built as often as the German guns destoyed them. The tunnels mentioned earlier were dug, and fitted with water and electricity and telephones; and mines, were bored under the German lines, their ends packed with high explosive so that at the right moment key strongpoints and their garrisons could be blown sky-high. Three hundred kilometres of telephone cables, buried to a depth of two metres, were laid along the corps front. One hundred portable bridges were constructed to enable field artillery to cross the trenches and get forward when the time came.

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* **Howitzers were high-angle, large-calibre guns, most useful for shelling trenches and buildings since the shell dropped almost vertically.**

The sudden concentration of fifty thousand horses and mules to pull trams and carry supplies within a restricted area where water was in short supply necessitated the construction of reservoirs, pumping stations, and seventy kilometres of pipeline. Provision had to be made for the treatment and rapid evacuation of casualties, removal of prisoners, and disposal of the dead.

Most of this work was carried out by night but it was simply not possible to conceal the results, since the Canadian lines were perfectly visible to observers on the ridge The Germans could not help but know that an attack was in the offing. Confident in the strength of their positions, they made little attempt to interfere, however. From time to time, (as they would normally do, in any case) they laid on small raids by night, and they occasionally used their artillery in attempts to destroy some of the Canadian preparations; but that only enabled the artillery observation flights of No.16 Squadron to plot the position of the batteries employed and the Canadian artillery to retaliate with counter-battery fire.

In conjunction with their preparations for an attack, the Canadians had established a major raiding programme designed to disturb the enemy and injure his morale while learning as much as possible about the ground they must eventually take and how it was defended. And, since these raids were commonly supported by artillery fire and the infantry had to be protected by a 'box' barrage while they were in the enemy lines, such raids provided an excellent opportunity to practice infantry/artillery co-operation.

On the night of 12/13 February some nine hundred men of the 10th Infantry Brigade 'inflicted an estimated 160 casualties (including the capture of more than 50 prisoners) and destroyed dug-outs, mine shafts and barbed wire; their own losses totalled approximately 150.' According to the raid report, the prisoners included 'one officer and three NCOs. Prisoners were of exceptionately good physique and appeared generally very intelligent.... Cotton underwear was worn by all ranks captured.'*

Recounting the result of the raid in such bland words gives no idea of the ferocity of the hand-to-hand fighting that marked most such incidents. In the enemy trenches, clubs, bayonets and bombs or grenades were the most used weapons, as when one strongpoint 'was dealt with by bombers using "P" [phosphorus] Bombs.'

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* Cotton was one of the products theoretically denied German by the Royal Navy's blockade. Its presence on well nourished German bodies would hardly have made the Admiralty happy.

> *A large number of these bombs were used on the dugouts in the TRIANGLE, forcing the occupants out. These were mostly blinded by phosphorus fumes. Owing to the very high parapet of trench and difficulty of leading these men as prisoners, it was found necessary to kill them.*

Such actions made nonsense of the Hague Conventions, just as the German introduction of gas, two years earlier, had done. In the darkness and confusion of trench raiding, it was was usually a case of kill or be killed for both Canadian and German.

At the end of the month, it was the Canadians' turn to suffer as the largest raid of the winter turned out to be a complete fiasco. Seventeen hundred men of the same brigade went out to reconnoitre and inflict damage on the defences of Hill 145 without any preliminary bombardment or wire cutting. Gas was to be used instead, and that required successive postponements while waiting for a favourable wind.

'This night by night postponement ... extended for more than a week and must have allowed the Germans to learn what was intended,' recalled Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns — then the rather junior signals officer of the brigade concerned — in his 1970 memoir, *General Mud.*

> *The officers of the raiding battalions and brigade headquarters concluded that there would be no surprise and that therefore the whole operation ought to be abandoned. These views were pressed on division [Watson] and corps [Byng] headquarters, but the higher command decided that the operations should nevertheless take place. I well recall overhearing General Odlum [the brigade commander] arguing with division for the cancellation of the raid, using very stiff, almost insubordinate language. Nevertheless, against the opposition of the officers who would have to carry it out, the raid took place early in the morning of the 1st of March.*

Not only were the Germans expecting them, but the gas did more harm than good.

> *Some witnesses report that a German bombardment of our front lines had broken a few of the gas cylinders, and the escaping gas caused the first trouble. When the gas was released in bulk, the wind drifted it to the south, almost parallel with our lines, instead of across into the German positions.... Seemingly, little or no gas was blown to the German trenches on the front of attack.... Under a murderous fire, and faced with substantially intact barbed wire obstacles, the unfortunate attackers were mown down.*

Nevertheless, the survivors bravely pressed on and broke into the German strongpoint. It is not known how many Germans were killed and wounded, but thirty-seven were taken prisoner — for the loss of nearly seven hundred Canadians, including two battalion commanders.

A great many dead and wounded men were left behind in the darkness, and shortly after daybreak the Germans offered a truce to enable the battlefield to be cleared. On some parts of the front a Christmas truce had been arranged in December 1914 (when British and German soldiers had exchanged toasts, and even kicked a soccer ball about No-man's-land) but that fraternization had been frowned upon by higher authorities, and instructions issued that it must not re-occur. The 3rd of March 1917 marked an exception, however, and over the two hours that the truce lasted Captain D.S. Elliot of the 73rd Battalion found himself conversing with a German 'brigadier'.[*] He wrote home to describe his unusual experience.

> *He [the German officer] was loud in his praises of Major Travers Lucas, of Hamilton, who, he said, had led his men so gallantly right up to their wire. Apparently it was not a common practice with their own officers.... The German Brigadier was a Bavarian, and, to talk to, not a bad sort. He was educated at St. Paul's School in London, and spoke perfect English. He didn't like war, he said, and hoped it would soon be over, and mentioned how queer it would seem to go back to our different lines after the truce and 'pot at one another again.' These were his own words. Indeed, the whole affair seemed so queer, standing upright out there in broad daylight, without a shot being fired, that it seemed to most of us like a dream.*

The full repercussions of that disastrous night are hard to assess. It may have given the enemy a false sense of confidence, but it must also have shaken the confidence of the Canadians, officers and men alike, in those higher commanders who had insisted on the raid taking place in defiance of common sense. However, other raids before it had been successful and others after it (from 20 March until 9 April smaller raids were carried out almost every night, at different points along the Canadian front) would also be successful.

Far behind the front, the infantry was being put through its paces, in line with the lessons learned from the French. An American volunteer, Private George V. Bell, recorded in his unpublished memoir that 'we went through a full-dress rehearsal for the capture of Vimy Ridge.'

> *A large stretch of ground was taped off to resemble as nearly as possible enemy positions on the ridge, and for a month we practised the*

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[*] The German Army had no such rank, their regiments (equivalent to British and Canadian brigades) being commanded by full colonels. The War Diary of the 87th Battalion describes him as a major, a rank appropriate to a German battalion commander. Apparently Captain Elliot was weak on German rank insignia.

> *attack, so that every man had in his mind a picture of the conditions on the ridge, and knew the part he was to play when the curtain went up. They were damn efficient in those rehearsals. It would never do for the actors to forget their lines.*
>
> *Once again we moved forward and what a sight met our eyes. Every road and pathway for miles back of our front was choked with brigades of British* infantry, all moving forward, batteries of massive siege guns and field artillery, cavalry, battalions of engineers, hundreds of motor lorries with ammunition and rations, [stage] properties for this great drama. All moving forward in the direction of Vimy Ridge and we knew that something big was under way.*

Another participant recorded that 'the "attacking" troops carried exactly what they would carry on the day of the assault; thus equipped they practised getting out of jumping-off trenches as quickly as possible and keeping up with the barrage. And mounted officers, carrying flags, rode ahead of the men at the same pace as a rolling barrage.'

Success at Vimy would depend on precise administration, careful preparation and perfect co-ordination. There could be no surprise, except in the matter of exact timing. In the last three weeks' preceding the attack a million shells were fired at the Ridge, on to a piece of ground eight thousand metres long by five thousand metres in depth. Not unexpectedly, then, on the last day of March, midway through that great bombardment, *Kronprinz* Rupprecht von Bayern, commanding the group of German armies that included the 6th Army, noted that 'an enquiry at 1 Bavarian Reserve Corps is answered in the sense that it expects the enemy attack to take place in about ten days.' The next day he added that:

> *A captured Canadian stated that after six to ten days of artillery preparation the attack on Vimy Ridge would be launched before the middle of the month. It seems to be correct after all that four Canadian divisions are committed in that area. According to the same Canadian prisoner, gas cylinders have been placed into position in the sector of the attack.*

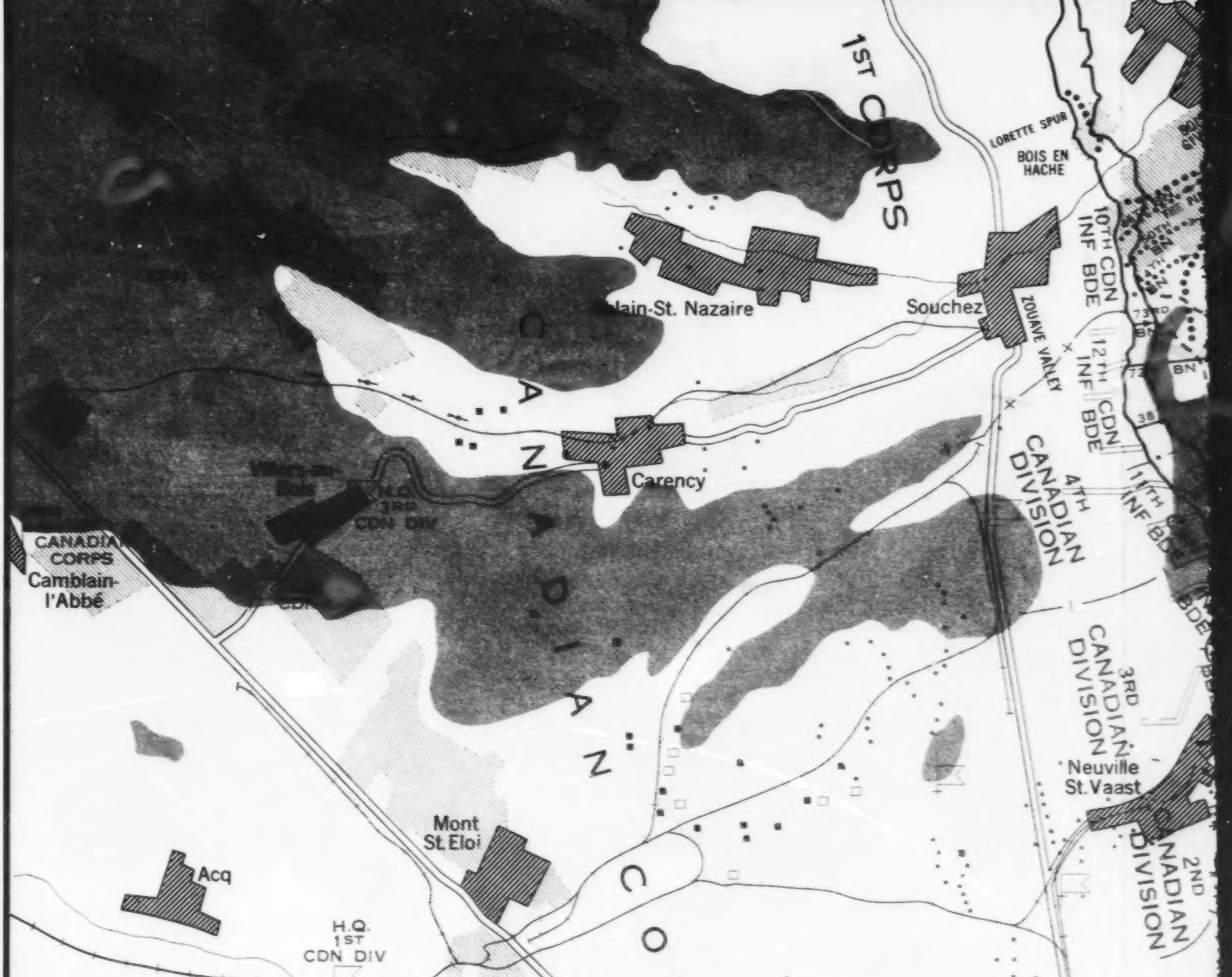
As with much intelligence, some of that information was right and some wrong. After the *débâcle* of 1 March, the Canadians had no intention of using gas cylinders, although there would be a proportion of gas shells thrown into the final bombardment.

By 6 April (the day that the United States entered the war, following the sinking of several American ships by U-boats, hard on the heels of the German proclamation of unrestricted submarine warfare) *Kronprinz*

---

* Being an American, Bell (like the Germans) usually made no distinction between Canadians and Britons.

At this point readers might like to pull out the map inserted here in order that they may be able to appreciate the relationships between divisions, brigaders and battalions, and follow the course of the Canadian attack graphically as well as textually.


1ST CORPS
LORETTE SPUR
BOIS EN HACHE
10TH CDN INF BDE
Ablain-St. Nazaire
Souchez
ZOUAVE VALLEY
12TH INF BDE
CDN BDE
4TH CANADIAN DIVISION
11TH INF BDE
Carency
Villers-au-Bois
H.Q. 3RD CDN DIV
CANADIAN CORPS
Camblain-l'Abbé
CANADIAN CORPS
3RD CANADIAN DIVISION
Neuville St. Vaast
2ND CANADIAN DIVISION
1ST CANADIAN DIVISION
Écurie
Mont St. Eloi
Acq
H.Q. 1ST CDN DIV
Maroeuil
Canadian attacks, 9 Apr
10 Apr
12 Apr
Divisional artillery batteries
Medium batteries
Heavy batteries
Super-heavy guns
Advanced divisional headquarters
Narrow-gauge railways
Subways
ONLY PRINCIPAL FEATURES AND THOSE MENTIONED IN THE TEXT ARE SHOWN

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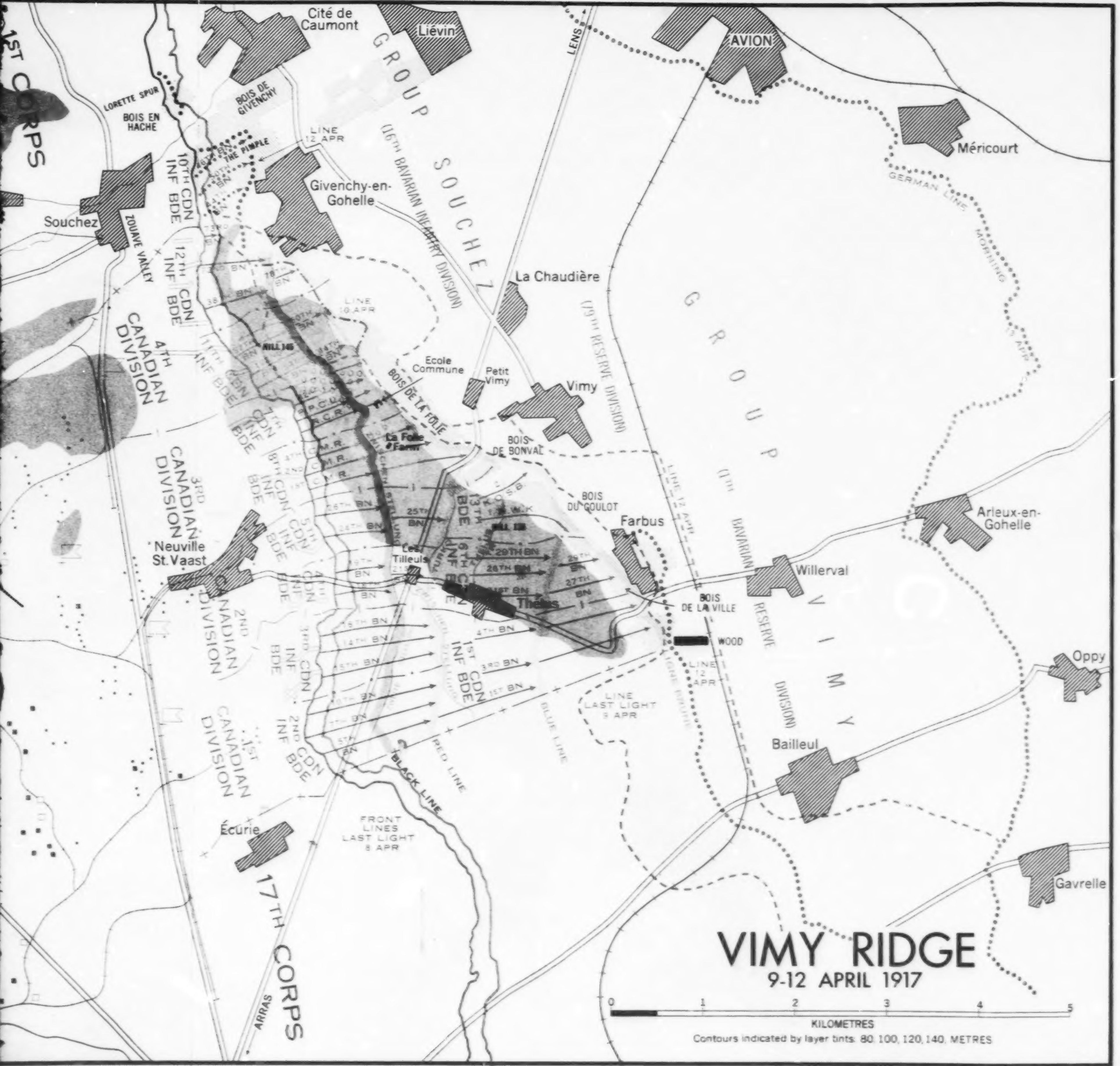
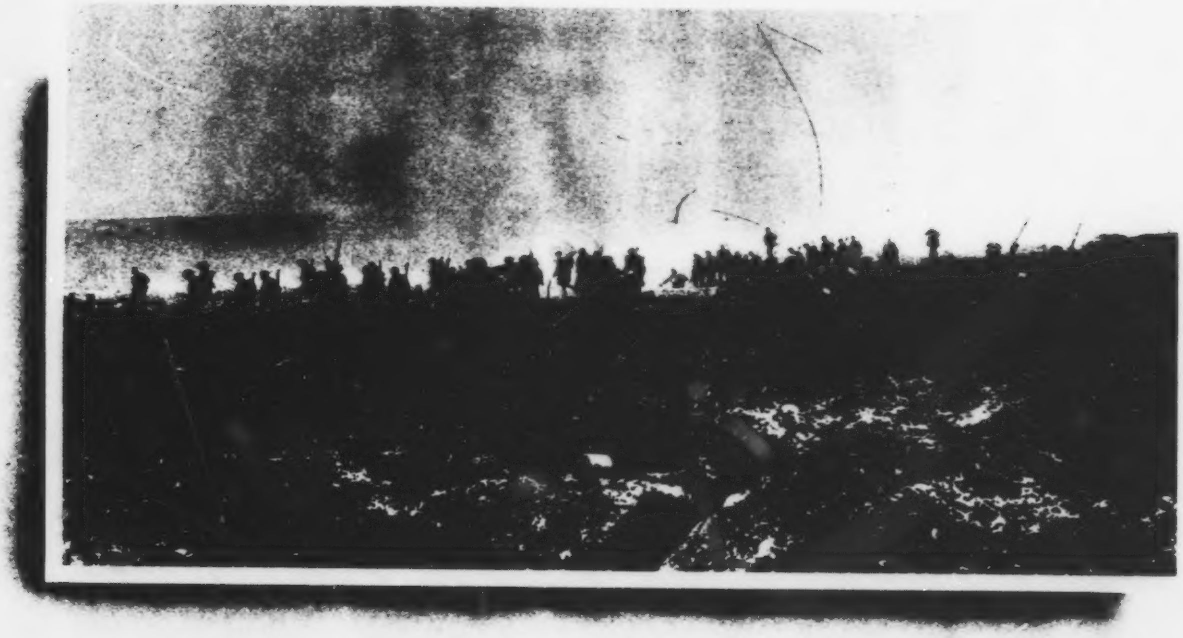

VIMY RIDGE
9-12 APRIL 1917
0
1
2
3
4
5
KILOMETRES
Contours indicated by layer tints: 80, 100, 120, 140, METRES
Cité de Caumont
Liévin
AVION
LENS
Méricourt
GERMAN LINE
MORNING 13 APR
1ST CORPS
LORETTE SPUR
BOIS EN HACHE
BOIS DE GIVENCHY
THE PIMPLE
LINE 12 APR
Souchez
ZOUAVE VALLEY
Givenchy-en-Gohelle
GROUP SOUCHEZ
(16TH BAVARIAN INFANTRY DIVISION)
10TH CDN INF BDE
12TH CDN INF BDE
11TH CDN INF BDE
4TH CANADIAN DIVISION
La Chaudière
LINE 10 APR
HILL 145
Ecole Commune
Petit Vimy
Vimy
BOIS DE LA FOLIE
La Folie Farm
BOIS DE BONVAL
(79TH RESERVE DIVISION)
GROUP VIMY
(1ST BAVARIAN RESERVE DIVISION)
7TH CDN INF BDE
8TH CDN INF BDE
3RD CANADIAN DIVISION
P.C.L.I.
R.C.R.
4TH C.M.R.
2ND C.M.R.
1ST C.M.R.
38TH BN
78TH BN
73RD BN
87TH BN
54TH BN
102ND BN
26TH BN
24TH BN
25TH BN
13TH BDE
K.O.S.B.
1ST R.W.K.
HILL 135
BOIS DU GOULOT
Farbus
6TH INF BDE
5TH CDN INF BDE
4TH CDN INF BDE
29TH BN
28TH BN
31ST BN
27TH BN
Les Tilleuls
Thélus
BOIS DE LA VILLE
WOOD
LINE 12 APR
Willerval
Arleux-en-Gohelle
Neuville St.Vaast
2ND CANADIAN DIVISION
3RD CDN INF BDE
1ST CDN INF BDE
2ND CDN INF BDE
1ST CANADIAN DIVISION
18TH BN
14TH BN
15TH BN
4TH BN
3RD BN
1ST BN
10TH BN
7TH BN
5TH BN
LINE LAST LIGHT 9 APR
BLUE LINE
RED LINE
BLACK LINE
Oppy
Bailleul
Écurie
FRONT LINES LAST LIGHT 8 APR
17TH CORPS
ARRAS
Gavrelle

Compiled and drawn by Historical Section G.S.



CHAPTER III

CHAPTER III

EASTER MONDAY

As we have already noted, the attack on Vimy Ridge was one small part of a much larger attack by the British Third and First Armies (with the weight of it carried by the former), but the enemy was in no doubt about the importance of the ridge or the quality of the troops preparing to take it. 'Committed at the most important spot was the Canadian Corps, counted among the best troops of the opponent,' wrote *General* Hermann von Kuhl, *Kronprinz* Rupprecht's chief of staff.

In the early hours of the morning (Ludendorff's fifty-second birthday, as well as Easter Monday) rain turned to sleet and snow, driven along the ridge by a strong north-westerly wind. The artillery had been firing a mixture of high explosive and gas shells all night (at a slowly decreasing rate, to lull the enemy into a belief that the attack would not come just yet) with never more than half the available batteries in action. Soon that would change. There was one heavy gun for each eighteen metres of Canadian front, and one field gun for every nine metres, more than double the density that had been employed on the Somme.

5:28 am. Machine guns started.
5:30 am. Mines [exploded].
5:30½ am. Guns started.

All eight hundred and fifty Canadian guns, supplemented by two hundred and eighty more of I (British) Corps (on the Canadians' left) and First Army were firing on the ridge as fast as the gunners — those of them with shells to handle sweating despite the chill — could reload their pieces. The heavy guns concentrated on the one hundred and seventy-five identified German batteries within their range, on ammunition dumps and key communication nodes. The field artillery fired for three minutes on the foremost German trenches and then their fire began to creep forward, lifting ninety metres every three minutes. Close behind it trudged the leading wave of infantry.

THE PLAN

This was a straightforward frontal assault, as all offensive operations on the Western Front were at this stage of the war. The plan devised by Byng and his staff was simple in principle, complex in application, and its success depended primarily upon perfect co-operation among the attackers. All four Canadian divisions would attack in line, arrayed in numerical order from south to north. Since the Canadian front line lay at an angle to the ridge, which was steeper and higher to the north, the 1st Division would need to advance four thousand metres over easier ground to reach its objectives in Farbus Wood, whereas a mere seven hundred metres (albeit over steeper and more strongly fortified slopes) would carry the 4th Division over the key summit of Hill 145.

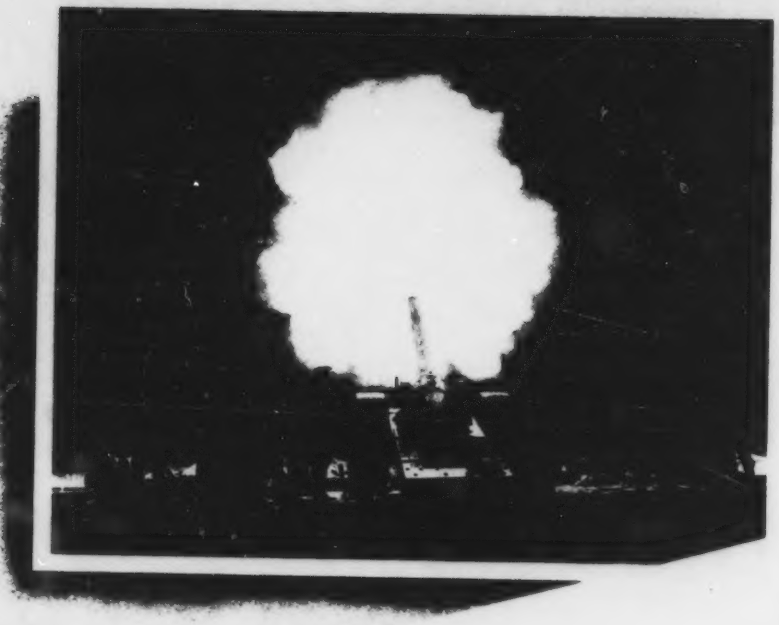
To meet those differing circumstances, the assault would be broken down into four bounds, each distinguished on the map by a coloured line. The Black line lay along the rear of the enemy's forward positions, roughly paralleling his front line, while the Red ran north along the *Zwischen Stellung*, or German second line, crossing the crest into the Bois de la Folie before turning north-westward, along the eastern rim of the ridge.

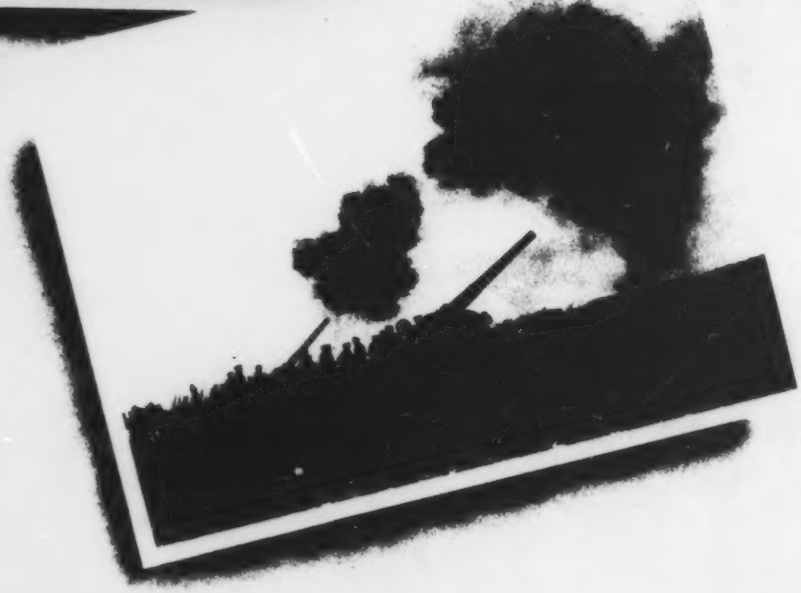
Reaching the Red line would complete the tasks of the 3rd and 4th Divisions, but on the fronts of the 1st and 2nd two more bounds would be required. There a Blue line would include the hamlet of Thélus, Hill 135, and the woods overlooking the village of Vimy. And the Brown Line, running through Farbus Wood, Farbus itself, and the Bois de Bonval, and constituting their final objectives, would bring them to the lower slopes of the south-eastern edge of the ridge, on the outskirts of Vimy.

Almost detached from the northern end of the ridge and overlooked by Hill 145 — which also masked it from the Scarpe valley to the south — the Pimple was important because it, in turn, overlooked Souchez and the Canadian line of communications that ran through Zouave valley. Its capture was not absolutely vital to success, although its acquisition would complete a notable feat of arms. There were not enough troops available, however, to attack it simultaneously with the other objectives and it might reasonably be left alone for twenty-four hours, until the main length of the ridge was securely in Canadian hands.

The whole front would begin to move at 5:30 am, and the 3rd and 4th Divisons should be on their objectives by 7:05. After a pause of two-and-a-half hours (to leapfrog reserve brigades through, and move up some artillery) the 1st and 2nd Divisons would resume their advance, reaching their final objectives by 1:18 pm. Once they had all been taken, an outpost line would be backed by a support line just beyond the crest, with a main line of resistance established a hundred metres down the western — or what would then be the reverse — slope, where it would be unobservable by the enemy ground forces and largely secure against artillery bombardment.

Finally Byng laid down a ruling which his biographer claims (probably rightly, at least as far as the





9-inch guns firing by night and day. [NAC PA 1178, PA 1182]

The 17th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, firing a captured German field gun. The use of enemy guns when possible was written into the Vimy operational plan because it would take so long to bring Canadian artillery up through the mud on to the crest of the ridge. [NAC PA 1018]

British were concerned) 'was revolutionary at that stage of the War.'

> *In the event of any Division or Brigade being held up, the units on the flanks will on no account check their advance, but will form defensive flanks in that direction and press forward themselves so as to envelop the strong point or centre of resistance which is preventing the advance. With this object in view reserves will be pushed in behind those portions of the line that are successful rather than those which are held up.*

In other words, success, not failure, should be reinforced.

That was all very well in its way, but complete success must begin and end with the capture of Hill 145. In the long term, the achievements of the 1st Division (Major-General Currie) would be dependent upon the 2nd (Burstall) capturing Thélus; Thélus could only be held if the 3rd Division (Lipsett) took La Folie farm; and the 3rd could not expect to be successful unless the commanding height of Hill 145 fell to Watson's 4th Division.

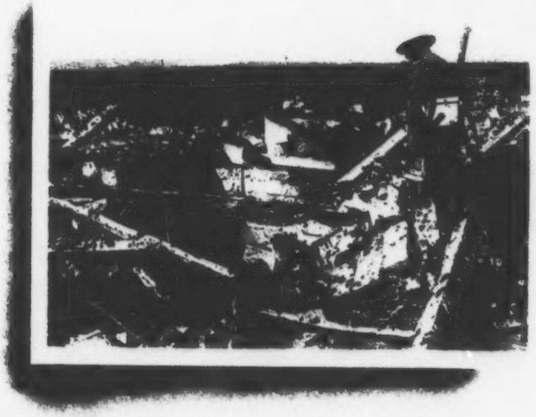
THE 1st DIVISION — 'NOTHING COULD STOP US....'

The 1st Division had farther to go but its assigned front would narrow as it advanced, so that the initial assault was launched by its 2nd and 3rd Brigades, side by side, with the 1st Brigade scheduled to pass through them on the Brown Line, where the frontage began to narrow quickly. Even the divisional commander, Arthur Currie, found the barrage 'awesome', yet once it passed over their trenches and dug-outs a number of gallant Germans were up in time to turn their machine-guns on the advancing infantry. 'The line, however, pressed steadily on, keeping well up to the magnificent rolling barrage,' according to the after-action report of the 3rd Brigade.

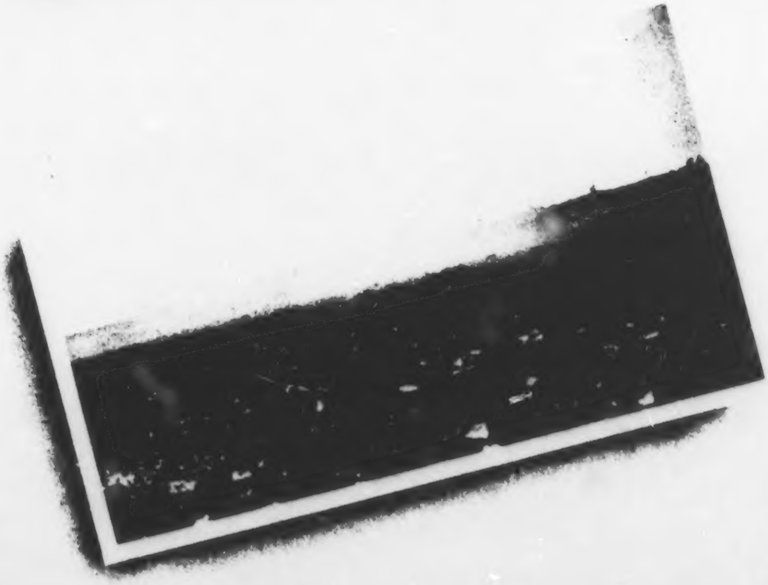
The first Canadians reached what was left of the enemy's foremost trenches while most of the surviving defenders were still in their deep dug-outs, five to ten metres below ground level. Since the attackers were 'leaning on the barrage', as the expression went, no more than half a minute elapsed after it lifted before men with grenades or phosphorus bombs were at the entrances to the dug-outs, dropping or rolling them inside before moving on.

> *All battalions report that as usual, the too impetuous pressed forward into the barrage and some undoubtedly became casualties....*
>
> *The 14th Battalion suffered heavy casualties here, and of the four hostile machine-guns which attempted to hold up their advance, 2 were put out of action by Mills bombs, one was attacked and put out of action by a party led by Lieut. DAVIDSON, while the remaining gun*

The whistle blows, and it's time to go "over the bags." [NAC PA 648]



Private William Milne won his VC for subduing a machine-gun position like this one, on Vimy Ridge near Thélus. [NAC PA 1122]



"The line, however, pressed steadily on, keeping well up to the magnificent rolling barrage." [NAC PA 1046]

> *was captured personally by C[ompany] S[ergeant] M[ajor] HURLEY, who bayoneted the crew.*

Two more machine-gun posts fell to Private W.J. Milne, a Scottish-born member of the 16th (Canadian Scottish) Battalion. As little groups of riflemen crept towards the first post 'from three sides' (German machine-gunners were rarely in a hurry to withdraw):

> *...a series of bomb explosions was heard in the direction of the enemy gun and ... Private Milne sprang up from a shell hole close to it, signalling his comrades to advance. He had crawled round on his hands and knees to within bombing distance of the enemy machine-gun crew, and with hand grenades had put every one of them out of action.*

In the second case there is less detail on record — only that Milne 'put out of action another German machine-gun which was seriously holding up the advance.' His valour was rewarded with a Victoria Cross but, killed in action later in the day, he never knew it.[*]

Milne's battalion, on the right of the 3rd Brigade front, suffered more heavily than any other 1st Division unit, with twenty officers (out of thirty) and over three hundred (nearly a half) of the other ranks killed or wounded. The only officer to come through unscathed[*] was Lieutenant C.F.B. Jones, an Ontarian who, like Jack Harris, had enlisted (in Calgary) in response to Prime Minister Borden's January 1916 call for half a million men. He had reached the front in November 1916, and now wrote home to report on his first major action.

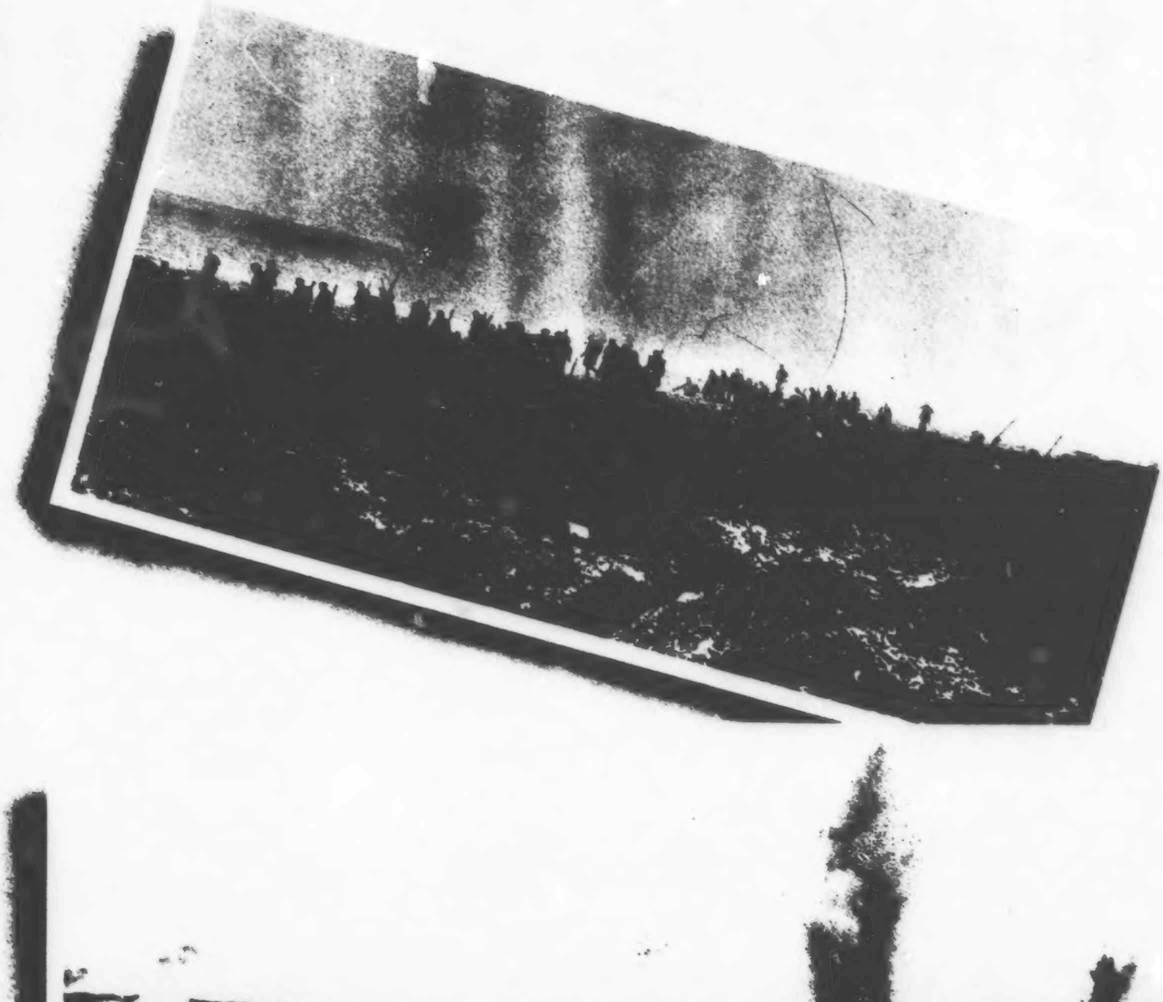
> *Sharp on time, 5.30 am. Easter Monday, there came one big crash, the whole weight of our artillery swept the Hun line and we walked out following under our barrage. It was a wonderful sight and I shall never forget it. Dawn was just breaking, the sky was bright with Hun fireworks, his infantry frantically sending up SOS to his artillery, but he could do little against our stuff.... The noise was terrific, but above all the din of the big guns could be heard the rattle of the Hun machine-guns as they endeavoured to stop the rush of the Canadians. Men dropped out here and there but nothing could stop us, and we reached our first objective in record time. Here there was a pause while our guns played on the Hun back trenches, and here I ran across young Archie Cornell, bright as a button, still leading his men....*
>
> *All day and until the next night, we remained at our last objective while other troops pased through us and drove the Hun back. It was*

---

[*] Milne's was the first of four VCs won by the 16th Battalion in the course of the war – the most of any Canadian unit.

[*] Jones would be wounded twice before the end of the war, however, and win a Military Cross at the Battle of Amiens, 8 August 1918, when he was severely wounded.

"Looking to either side one could see thousands of men, walking slowly but none the less certainly, into the German lines." [NAC PA 1086]



"... the too impetuous pressed forward into the barrage, and some undoubtedly became casualties...." [NAC PA 1087]

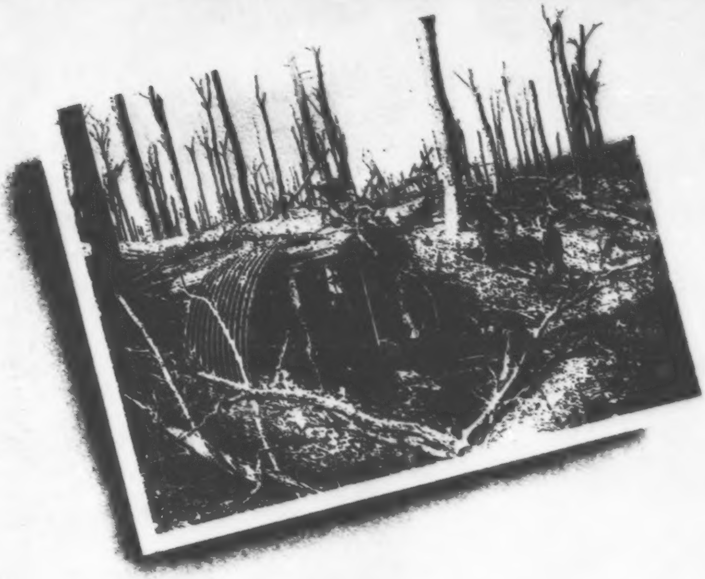
> *beautifully worked and by the afternoon we had taken prisoners galore, officers and generals, guns and all sorts of stuff....*
>
> *We have had to pay for it, but not too heavily. Poor Mac was killed early in the fight.... Poor Archie Cornell, the brightest little sport in the battalion, was killed fifty yards from the final objective. Campbell, who played tennis in Calgary, a friend of Sheffield's, was killed early in the day; Kirkham was wounded. When the final objective was reached, two of us [officers] were left in our company - the O[fficer] C[ommanding] and myself. He had been wounded twice but carried on until the next morning, when he went back to the [Casualty] Clearing Station, and I assumed command of the company - the only one left without a scratch.*

Jones then 'spent the afternoon sleeping in an officer's dug-out lighted by electricity, and on a comfortable bed that only a few hours before a [German] commander had slept on.'

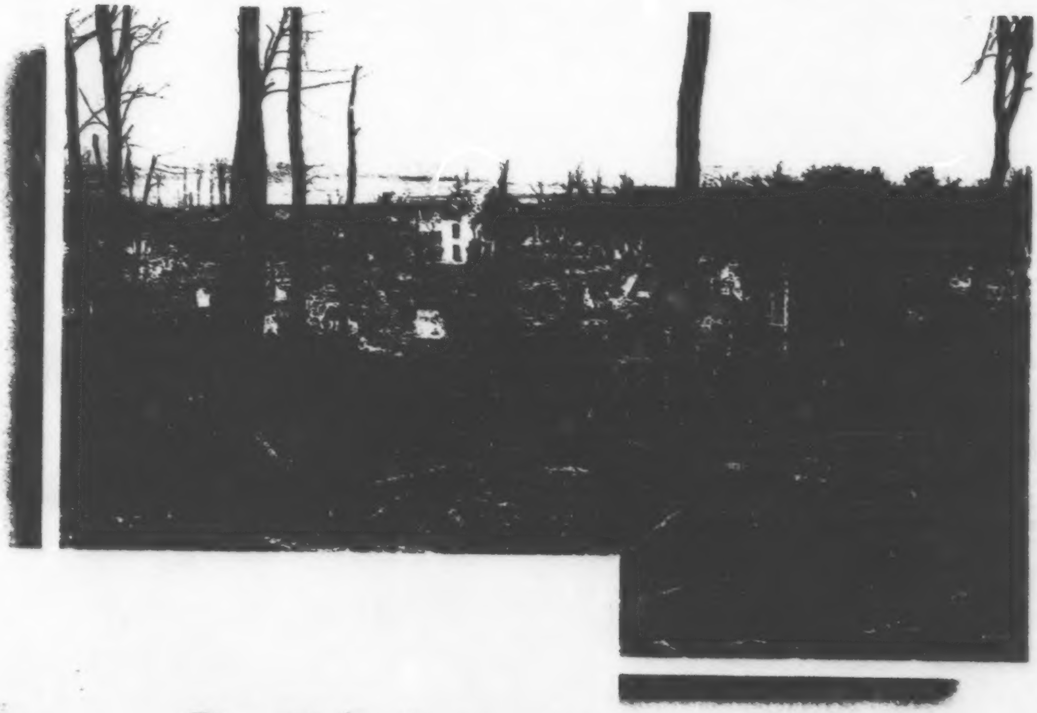
There is a fine ring of reality about that admission. Nothing is more physically exhausting than the emotions aroused by an imminent prospect of death or mutilation; and every man who trudged up Vimy Ridge that day had endured hours of fearful waiting, even before he left the start line. During the advance, as other men dropped about him, his fears must surely have intensified a hundred-fold, and if the whole truth were known it is likely that a great many Canadians fell asleep once the adrenalin had stopped flowing. (Others, numbered among the 'moppers-up', took to playing cards, as we shall see in due course.)

The 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders of Canada) attacked in the centre of the divisional front. Lieutenant Gordon Chisholm, from Toronto, explained to his family that 'we had been put into the section of the line where we attacked [i.e., raided] some time ago and had ample time to study the ground before going over.'

> *A few minutes before the hour I issued rum to the men and then we waited.... When our time came, we climbed on the parapet and started over. Looking to either side one could see thousands of men walking slowly but none the less certainly into the German lines. Ahead of us our artillery cleared the way. When we reached the German lines we hardly recognized them. What had once been trenches were only mere sunken lines....*
>
> *I had to take up a position in a wood. The wood when I found it consisted of a piece of ground covered with stumps about a foot high. There we stopped and commenced digging in. It was while running about superintending operations that I 'got mine'. A machine gun opened up on us, and as I was trying to get away from it I stumbled on a bayonet and*



A German gun position just outside Farbus [NAC PA 994]



The ruined village of Farbus, totally destroyed by shellfire. [NAC PA 1084]

German officers surrender, looking as if they cannot believe what has just happened. [NAC PA 1032]

> *got a nasty cut in the foot.... I had to run, sore foot and all, as the ground was being shelled. On reaching our old trenches I was rather surprised to find that I had a following: Germans seemed to spring up out of the ground. I counted up and found I had six to guide, so I started them off down the trench and directed them from behind.*

With the Red line secure the 1st Brigade came leapfrogging through, its 1st (Western Ontario) Battalion on the extreme right of the Canadian line. 'There was a little town on our left,' wrote Private J.H. Hapgood, from Simcoe, Ontario, whose letter to friends somehow got into the august columns of Britain's most influential newspaper, *The Times*. Hapgood was looking uphill, across the divisional boundary, at the village of Thélus on the 2nd Division's front, which was — as has already been pointed out — the key to the 1st Division's success.

> *When we came up even with it we had to stop for ten minutes while our artillery razed that town. It took them just ten minutes to put that town clean out of sight, as they turned every gun that was within range on it. There were hundreds of shells put into that town every second.*

Gunner Ferguson, with the heavy artillery some miles back and knowing nothing of Hapgood's involvement, recorded simply that 'we had ten minutes on Thélus, switching over to Farbus.' With Thélus destroyed, Hapgood and his comrades pressed forward again.

> *We kept on pushing ahead until about 10 o'clock before we came to the little bit of ground our Batt. had to take. There we were held up by a Fritzie bombing post. They were more than throwing the bombs at us. At last I caught sight of the Germans through a low place in their parapet, and at once opened [up with] my [Lewis] gun at them. I forgot to tell you that I was in command of a section that day, and had a gun all to myself.*
>
> *I emptied about two pans [drums of ammunition] and a half at them and then I went to move to another shell hole a little nearer to the Fritzies. I just got up on top of the shell hole when something hit me. I let go of the machine-gun and fell back into the mud. I could see nothing and felt awful dizzy. I was sure from the amount of blood that the best part of my head was gone. I could feel the blood running over my eyes into my nose and down my neck.... In about five minutes one of our fellows came over and bandaged me up and I felt not too bad. In about fifteen minutes my pal came back shot through both legs and together we struck out for a dressing station. From there I was carried on a stretcher by some Fritzie prisoners to the ambulance....*

The 1st Battalion was squeezed out of the narrowing front at the Blue line while the 2nd (Eastern Ontario) and 3rd (Toronto) carried on. To the 1st Division's right, however, the Third

German medics assist with the wounded. [NAC PA 1125]

Picking up the wounded at an advanced dressing station. [NAC PA 680]

Some tanks crossed the German front line, but they soon bogged down in the mud. [DND 0-2285]

Army's 51st (Highland) Division was not doing nearly so well. Its neighbouring brigade could not keep up with the Canadians (eventually the Scots stopped five hundred metres short of the final objective), so that the 3rd Battalion was compelled to turn the front of its right-hand company ninety degrees away from the axis of advance in order to cover an exposed flank. The 2nd Battalion side-stepped slightly to the right, thinning its own front slightly to take up a share of the 3rd's, and then the brigade began to dig in on the Brown line, in Farbus Wood.

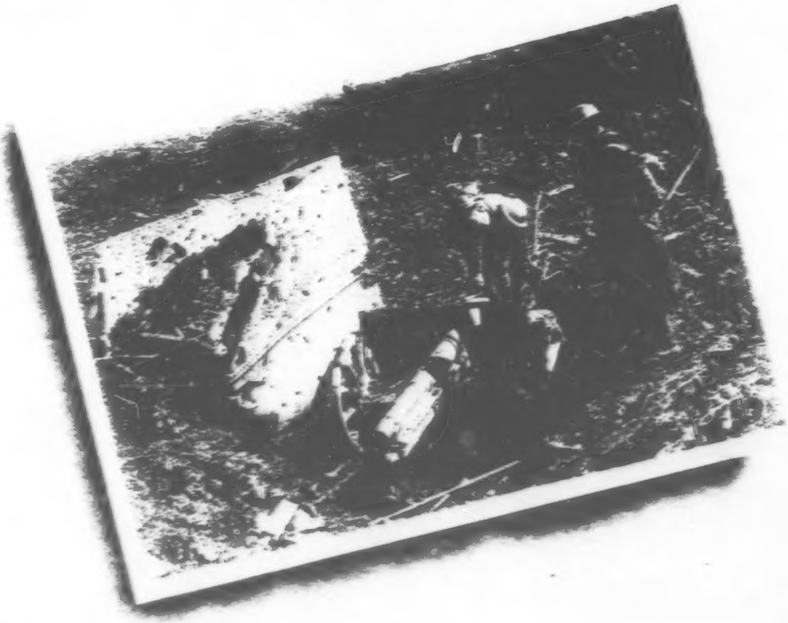
The 2nd and 3rd Brigades, which had made the initial assault, had suffered considerably more casualties than the 1st, which had passed through them on the Red line. The 2nd had lost (in round figures) eleven hundred in killed, wounded and missing, and the 3rd nearly a thousand, compared with the four hundred and fifty incurred by the 1st. Today these figures seem horrifying, but an advance of four thousand metres at a cost of twenty-five hundred casualties indicated a degree of success greater by an order of magnitude than any that had been achieved on the Western Front, by any of the antagonists, since 1914.

THE 2nd DIVISION — 'INDIVIDUAL COURAGE AND INITIATIVE...'

Although it did not have quite so much distance to cover as the 1st, it had seemed to the planners that the 2nd Division might have the hardest task of all. Divisional boundaries had been set along a series of easily recognized features, so that the possibility of troops straying from their own axes of advance on to those of their neighbours would be minimized. Thus the 2nd Division's initial front of attack was narrower than that of the 1st Division — about twelve hundred metres, as against fifteen hundred — but its front widened as it advanced, particularly between the Red and Brown lines. If the initial attack was to be launched by two brigades in line (as it was), with the third to pass through them on the Red line, then the latter's frontage would soon be more than two thousand metres.

That was simply too much for one brigade, but two were certainly needed for the initial assault and the division only mustered three; and so a British brigade — the 13th, detached from the British 5th Division which had been put at Byng's disposal as a corps reserve — had been assigned to join the 6th Brigade in the second phase of the division's assault. And because the 2nd would have to deal with the garrisons of the battered remnants of Les Tilleuls and the ruins of Thélus and Farbus — the latter on the Brown line, or final objective — it was allocated all eight of the Mark I tanks placed at Byng's disposal.

German machine-gunners fought valiantly, but in the end could not stem the assault. Canadians occupy a battered machine-gun nest on the crest of the ridge. [NAC PA 1101]



A high-velocity, low-trajectory field gun, suitable for anti-tank work, knocked out near Thélus. [NAC PA 976]

All eight of them bogged down in the Vimy mud before they could get into action. Their only value, if Captain R.J. Manion, medical officer of the 21st (Eastern Ontario) Battalion — who would win a Military Cross this day — is to be believed, 'was that of drawing and localizing the enemy fire to a certain extent, and so marking out areas of danger that it were well to avoid.' But, happily, the tanks were not needed. Things went as well for the 2nd Division as they had done for the 1st, despite the brave efforts of enemy machine-gunners resisting to the bitter end.

A 'series of acts of individual courage and initiative' prevented any serious checks to their advance, as when the men of the 18th (Western Ontario) Battalion's C Company found themselves enfiladed by machine-gun fire on the second line of defences, just short of Les Tilleuls.

> *Men began to fall, hit by the unseeen enemy. The others peered around in the gloom [it was not yet fully light] trying to discover the [machine-gun] nest. Lance-Sergeant [Ellis] Sifton saw it first....*
>
> *Sifton ... rushed ahead, leaped into the trench, charged into the crew, overthrew the gun and turned on the gunners with his bayonet.*

More Germans charged down the trench towards him, and Sifton (from Wallacetown, Ontario) used his bayonet and rifle butt to hold them off until his men could join him. The fight was over, and the trench firmly in Canadian hands, when 'a dying German, one of Sifton's victims, rolled over to the edge of the trench, picked up a rifle and took careful aim....' Sifton, like Milne, was awarded a posthumous VC.

The 21st (Eastern Ontario) Battalion, which was assigned to take Les Tilleuls, lost a third of its strength in doing so. On balance, however, half of that loss was compensated for by a twenty-two-year-old lieutenant, J.E. Johnson, who (accompanied by an unidentified corporal) came upon 'a long winding staircase' at Les Tilleuls leading down to a large cave that the enemy had turned into a company-sized dug-out. 'They threw down a couple of Mills bombs, drew their revolvers, and went down, to be confronted in flickering candlelight by one hundred and five German officers and men, all armed.' Bluffing that he had a large force on the surface, Johnson and his corporal disarmed them all, rounded up a half-dozen more men to form an escort, and then despatched them to the rear as prisoners-of-war. His initiative would be rewarded with a Military Cross.

The 31st (Alberta) Battalion took the ruins of Thélus and offered yet another account of the havoc wrought there by the artillery. 'The damage to THELUS is extraordinary. Buildings are demolished, trenches obliterated and wire smashed to

A shell bursts in the streets of Vimy [Thélus?] [NAC PA 1289]

The official caption reads "Main Street, Vimy", but this looks more like Thélus. Vimy was not as badly damaged as this. [NAC PA 1140]

Holding newly-won ground was often more difficult than taking it. Canadians dig in just behind the eastern rim of the crest. [NAC PA 1085]

> *getting them together. There is not an N[on] C[ommissioned] O[fficer] here. I have one machine gunner here but he has lost his cocking piece off the gun and the gun is covered with mud. The men's rifles are a mass of mud, but they are cleaning them. My two runners and I came to what I had selected previously as my Company H[ead]Q[uarters]. We chucked a few bombs down and then came down [here].*
>
> *The dug-out is 75 feet down and is very large. We explored it and sent out 75 Prisoners and two Officers. This is not exaggerated as I counted them myself. We had to send them out in batches of 12, so they could not see how few we were. I am afraid few of them got back as I caught one [Ger]man shooting one of our men after he had given himself up. He did not last long — and so I am afraid we could not take any back except a few who were good dodgers, as the men chased them back with rifle shots. The dugout is a very large one and will hold a couple of hundred....*
>
> *I cannot give an estimate of our casualties but believe they are severe. Will send back word as soon as possible. There is a field of fire of 400 yards or more and if there were a couple of Brigade machine-guns [here] they could keep them [the Germans] back easily as the ground is almost impassable. Horrible mess. There are lots of dead Bosche and he evidently held [out] well.*
>
> *I can see 72nd men on our left. The 78th have gone through after we reached here. The barrage was good but the men did not keep close to it enough and held back....*

MacDowell strengthened his position, and issued three more reports during the course of the day. At 10:30 he informed his commanding officer that he had:

> *... been along the line. The dugout we occupy is at the corner of CYPRUS and BABY. It has three entrances well distant from each other, and will hold easily 250 men at the very least. A tunnel leads down towards our lines, which I did not explore.... There are only 15 men with us, of whom two are stretcher bearers. The rifles are one mass of mud. I have two Lewis Guns and ... four pans [of ammunition]. Both guns are out of action on account of the mud. We have a very few bombs as we had to bomb several dug-outs.*
>
> *The 78th I have no trace of, but there are two German machine-guns just in front of us. They are firing constantly. Snipers are also busy. We cannot locate them as yet. The ground is practically impassable. His aeroplanes came over and saw a few of my men at [the] dug-out entrance, and now we are getting his heavies from our right and his left. I have no NCOs whatever, and unless I get a few more men with serviceable rifles, I hate to admit it, but we may be driven out. Three of the men are wounded as it is, so I might as well tell you the facts of the case.... There are a lot of wounded out in*

atoms; there is hardly an inch of ground but bears witness to the tremendous effect of our guns.'

The advance from the Blue to the Brown line was effected by the 27th (Winnipeg) and 29th (Vancouver) Battalions, with two battalions of the British 13th Brigade — the King's Own Scottish Borderers and the Royal West Kents — on their left. The Canadians were now over the low flattened crest of the ridge, and so deep in the German positions that they were becoming intimately involved with the foremost batteries of German field artillery. One opened fire on them at a range of no more than fifty metres, according to the British Official History.

> *Thereupon the front wave of both battalions raised a cheer, charged down the slope, and bayoneted or captured the gunners. Continuing the advance, the second-line trench was crossed and the eastern edge of the Bois de la Ville [just in front of Farbus] was secured, 250 prisoners, including the commander and staff of the 3rd Bavarian Reserve Regiment, being taken in various dug-outs on the way.*

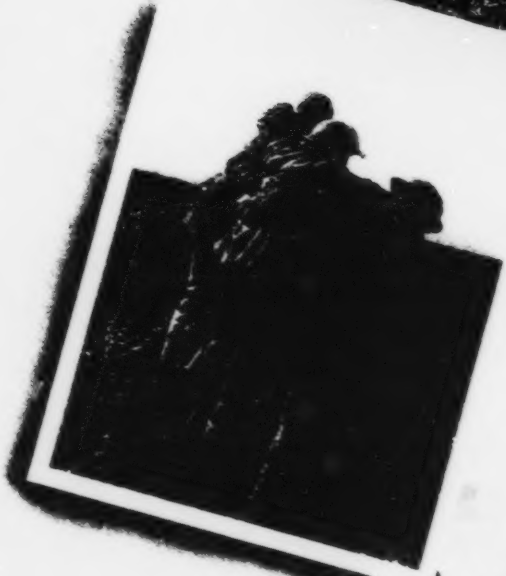
At 11 a.m. the commander of the 79th Reserve Division had issued orders for an 'immediate' counter-attack to re-capture Hill 135 by three Bavarian battalions. The troops began to move forward but a subordinate commander, trying to cling to La Folie wood and knowing nothing of the proposed counter-attack, ordered those of them that reached his positions to fill yawning holes in his defences along the lower edge of the wood. Counter-orders reached him too late: darkness was falling before two or three companies had been re-formed and were ready to move, and then they were too few in numbers and firepower to launch an effective effort. Six hours or more after it was supposed to start, this counter-attack broke down before it could develop any momentum.

The 2nd Division's total casualties were only some thirty less than those of the 1st's — and again the heaviest losses were incurred by the two brigades that began the attack. In the final phase, the British 13th Brigade lost a hundred and fifty men less than the Canadian 6th, which, curiously, suffered a disproportionate number of wounded to killed. Normally, the ratio would be roughly three to one — as it was among the other battalions of both the 1st and 2nd Divisions on Vimy Ridge — but in the 6th Brigade on this occasion it was about five to one.

3rd DIVISION

The 3rd Division attacked on a frontage similar to that of the 2nd, but had rather less than two-thirds the distance to go on its right and less than half that on the left. The only potentially significant obstacle it faced was La Folie farm. It also

Canadian machine-gunners ready themselves for a counter-attack that never came. [NAC PA 1017]



In some areas, the ground was so bad that badly-wounded men fell into shell holes and drowned. This soldier was lucky; hit in the leg or foot, his comrades help him make his way back to an advanced dressing station. [DND DHist-15]

Billy Bishop, not yet the winner of a VC. For some obscure reason, a censor had blacked out the serial number on the tail of his Nieuport fighter. [DND 0-1751] enjoyed the advantage of protected approaches through the two longest tunnels of the front, *Goodman* (1,500 metres) and *Grange* (1,100 metres), which ensured fewer casualties during the approach phase and thus enabled its battalions to 'shake out' into their attack formations with minimal dislocation.

Three of the four Mounted Rifle battalions in the 8th Brigade — the 1st, 2nd and 4th, with the 3rd being assigned to mopping-up — swept up the slope hard on the heels of the barrage, giving enemy machine-gunners no chance to come into action. The Germans had tunnels, too, linking their forward positions with those further back, and the 2nd CMR captured over one hundred and fifty men huddled at the eastern end of one, 'many of whom were only half dressed.'

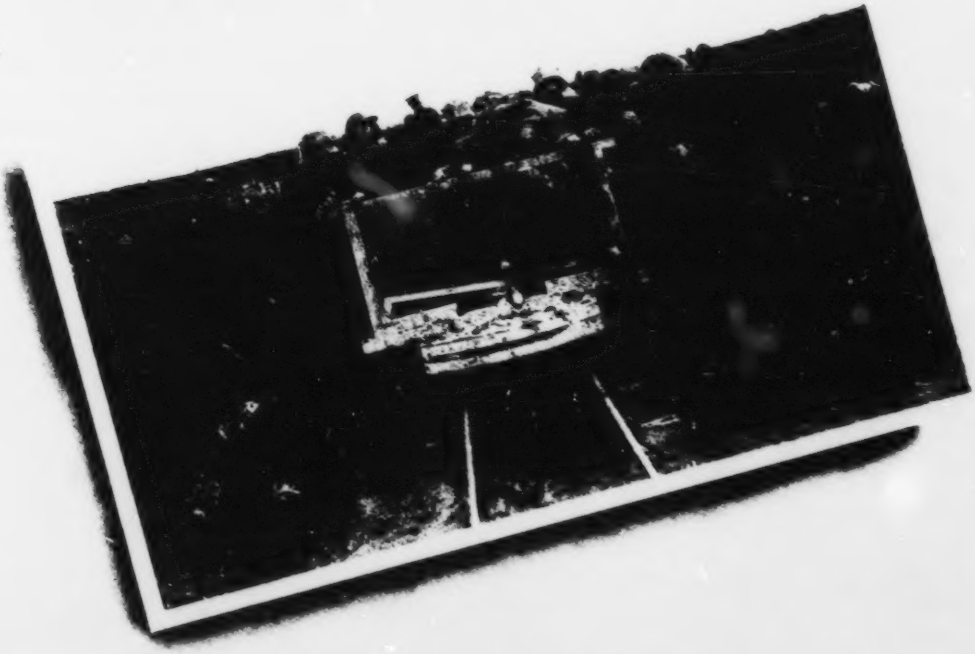
News that the 'English' were at the one end of the tunnel led the German battalion commander concerned, who had his headquarters at the other (western) end, to try and withdraw.

> *No sooner had it been decided to abandon the battalion headquarters at the tunnel entrance than the first English appeared 200 metres away and brought a machine-gun into action at the Rubleben House. Pursued by the fire of this troublesome gun, the battalion commander, his staff, and twenty men went back along the communication trench, knee deep in mud, towards the second-line positions; but most of the staff and all the men were killed or wounded before reaching it.*

This book began with the experiences of Jack Harris, serving with the 4th CMR, and it may be of some interest at this point to present the recollections of an ordinary German soldier in the trenches the CMRs were attacking. The regimental history of the 263rd Reserve Regiment reports that 'only one man of the 1st Battalion ... returned from the forward line on 9 April.' He was 'a quiet, sober-thinking farmer from the Lüneburg area' who subsequently told his superiors that 'to begin with the attack made no progress as the German rifle and machine-gun fire was very effective.'

> *Especially machine-guns in flanking positions had a great effect and struck down rows of Englishmen [but] the German artillery barrage was directed on to the enemy position and went over the heads of the mass of the British [Canadian] infantry and did no harm to it. The enemy artillery, on the other hand, according to Hagemann's statements, was directed during the entire attack by means of 'Very Lights' from observation planes. As a result the fire was very well placed and as the attack made progress it was always just a little forward of the British infantry. This and the immensely heavy British rifle and machine-gun fire caused very heavy German casualties.*

Shells fall near an advanced dressing station. [NAC PA 625]



The light railways were a boon for moving supplies forward and wounded (or dead) back. [NAC PA 1024]

> *The machine-gun in the proximity of Hagemann, as well as its entire crew, were put out of action by artillery fire. As the men in the most forward lines were gradually rendered unable to fight, the opponent finally got into the first trench. Moving from crater to crater, our men withdrew to the second line, which had been unoccupied and was now defended by a mere few rifles.*
>
> *In the end Hagemannn did not see any more unwounded men in his neighbourhood, and since he had been wounded three times and his right arm was paralysed he was no longer able to keep fighting.*

Floating above the battle in his Niewport fighter (and no doubt keeping a wary eye open for the Red Baron), Captain William Avery Bishop, MC,[*] concluded that 'the men seemed to wander across No-man's-land, and into the enemy trenches, as if the battle was a great bore to them. From the air it looked as though they did not realize they were at war and were taking it all entirely too quietly.'

He might have gained a different impression if he had been there on the ground (the 7th and 8th Brigades, which carried the 3rd Division's attack, took nearly a thousand casualties each, about the same as the leading brigades of the 1st and 2nd Divisions) but in truth the battle was going unbelievably well by First World War standards. The Princess Patricias, who had switched their loyalties from the British 27th Division to the 3rd Canadian Division at the end of 1915,[*] exited from *Grange* tunnel in the centre of the 7th Brigade front, and started forward with their regimental pipers playing the men 'over the top' and then following on as stretcher-bearers.

On their right marched the Royal Canadian Regiment, the infantry component of Canada's pre-war Permanent Force. The RCR had been exiled to Bermuda in 1914, instead of taking its place in the First Contingent; but the losses of Second Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy, had brought it, too, to France. The Royals had arrived in England in September 1915, and crossed the Channel in early November, before being assigned to the forming 3rd Division at the end of that year.

The Patricias soon found that 'the ground was very difficult but most of the obstacles were created by the terrible efficiency of the British and Canadian siege batteries', according to their regimental historian. There

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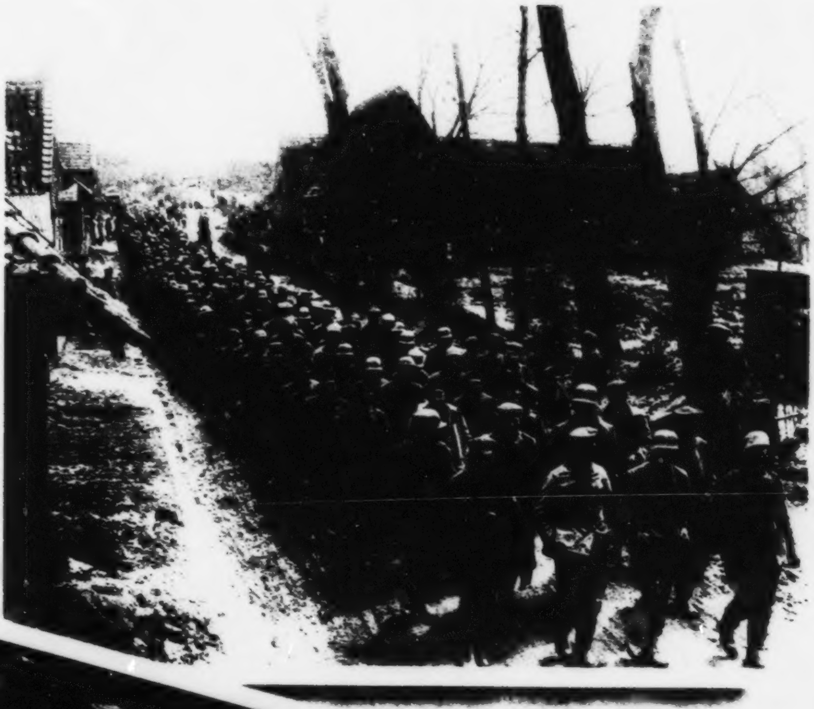
[*] Who would end the war as Major Bishop, VC, DSO and Bar, MC, DFC, *Croix de Guerre avec Palme*, credited with 72 aerial victories as the British Empire's second-highest scoring 'ace'.

[*] When the PPCLI had been formed nearly all of the recruits had been born in the British Isles, but cusualties had been replaced with native-born Canadians. The 27th Divison had been ordered to Salonika, and 'remarkably the decision seems to have been left to the Regiment' as to whether is should shift to another British formation or join the 3rd Division.

The main targets for heavy artillery were the enemy's gun positions. These are dummy German guns, carriages with tree trunks or branches for barrels, but their undamaged condition suggests that no one was fooled by them. [NAC PA 1220]



"For you, the war is over." Few of these prisoners look unhappy as they pass through a knocked-about French village. [NAC PA 1142]

Men digging mines under the enemy's positions needed air, that had to be pumped down by hand in many cases. [NAC PA 306] were occasional machine-gun posts to be bombed and grenaded, but 'it is a paradox, disconcerting to the historian, that complete successes make less history (in the case of small units, at least) than does failure or partial achievement.' Having taken their objectives, however, they suffered 'a gruelling enfilade and almost a reverse fire' from Hill 145, which overlooked the whole divisional front. Even worse was the German artillery fire that began to fall on them during the afternoon, and 'the list of killed and wounded, comparatively so trifling during the assault, mounted alarmingly.'

Here, where the Canadians had started much closer to the ridge, its slopes were steeper and its crest narrower, so that there was no need for a second wave of infantry to pass through and carry the attack forward, as had been the case further south. All three assault battalions* of the 7th Brigade reached their final objectives, on the edge of La Folie Wood, and consolidated there. Private William Breckinridge of the 42nd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), on the Patricias' left (and the extreme left of both the brigade and divisional front), remembered the sight as he and his comrades crested the ridge. 'In the valley before us we could see the Germans withdrawing their guns. We opened up on them with our Lewis gun, but they were beyond our range and the fire was ineffective.'

He and his comrades might have done better to turn their attention to their left — the one part of the front where things were not going quite according to plan.

THE 4TH DIVISION

Indeed there would be all sorts of difficulties to be overcome in taking and securing Hill 145, and the task would not be completed in one day. But before outlining some of the perils endured and predicaments overcome by the men of the 4th Division, we might consider the fight for it from an enemy perspective. This transparently honest account by a private soldier of the 262nd Reserve Regiment, a Berliner by the name of Otto Schröder, who had spent the night on sentry duty somewhere on the northern slopes of the hill — his location cannot now be established with certainty — illustrates perfectly the peculiar blend of terror and incongruity that marks all battlefields.

> *...In the morning, tired and black from night duty, we lay down with the words: 'Now let us pull the blankets over our heads and sleep.' Suddenly there was heavy drumfire. The day-sentries shouted: 'Outside! the British are coming!'*
>
> *...While I was handing out hand grenades, in the trench the shooting had already started. The English —*

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* The fourth – 22nd – battalion was assigned to mop-up behind the advance on this occasion.

German officers pose for a photograph outside the deep dug-out on Vimy Ridge that served as their company headquarters before and during the battle. [NAC C55256]

A young soldier inspects a German strongpoint captured by D Company of the 4th Battalion, CEF, who had already painted their claim on the gun shield. [NAC PA 1076]

they were Canadian troops — had broken through on our left, in the sector of the 3rd Bavarian Reserve Regiment, and, advancing from the road, were already rolling up our position. My corporal told me to go down into the dug-out and fetch the box with the egg-shaped grenades.... But on the way back, when I had gone up half of the thirty-eight rungs, the corporal suddenly shouted: 'Come up, to the left the British have already passed the trench.' So I dropped the grenades back into the dug-out and went up into the trench. ...I noted that I was alone...only a dead comrade was lying on the edge, in a grotesque way....his name I had forgotten.

Then I ventured beyond the edge of the trench, and everywhere, left and right and forward, I saw only Britishers, * *who, in their 'straw hats' [i.e., steel helmets] looked as if they were hare-hunting. As I found out later, they had drunk much liquor.*

Now I had to act, but how? I pulled the dead soldier into the trench and lay down beside him, as if dead too. Meanwhile the assault waves were passing over us. This was going on for quite a time. Suddenly a strapping big Canadian appeared and curiously stuck his fixed bayonet into my dead comrade. This was the worst moment of my life. I moved and the Tommy shouted: 'Come on.'

With that I climbed out of the hole (silently saying good bye to my dead comrade). Immediately he held his bayonet against my chest and said: You blässiert, no?' ['Are you wounded?']. * *I did not know what he meant, and shrugged my shoulders. Then, as suddenly as he had come, he disappeared.*

Again I was all alone. I ran in the direction of die Giesslerhöhe *[the Pimple], towards the positions of the 261st Regiment. While I was passing some fieldwork [trench or dugout] an Englishman jumped up and fired at me. I was hit in the right forearm. After that, while I was wandering around in a wounded state, suddenly my pal Cordes jumped out from some cover where he had managed to hide unhurt. How glad I was to meet a good comrade in the midst of all the enemy can only be appreciated by one who has had the same experience.*

We took each other by the hand and ran around aimlessly among the dead, who had been mowed down here by machine-guns. There were our own soldiers and also some British. We found a dug-out and sat down on the stair for protection from the heavy fire on the ridge, for the German artillery had begun to fire on it with heavy guns.

Now the big question was: 'Where are we? In our own positions or in those of the enemy?' My friend thought we were in the enemy positions; I thought we were in our

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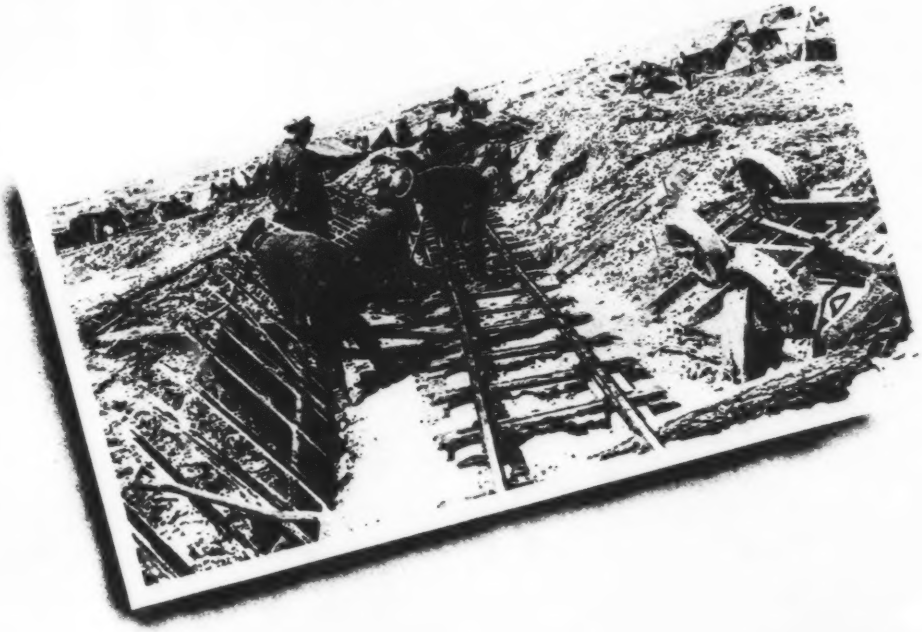
* Another synonym for Canadians.

* Apparently this was a francophone Canadian, trying to 'Germanize' the verb *blesser* – to wound.

It was a struggle to bring up the guns onto the crest of the ridge after the battle. [NAC PA 1015]



Laying track across the top of the ridge, so that ammunition and food could be brought forward. [NAC PA 1215]

Bringing up ammunition on mule-drawn tram cars once the track was complete. [NAC PA 1135]

> *own. So I said: 'We stay put until our division makes a counter-attack, and then we are saved.'*
>
> *While we were discussing this, a door opened in [the entrance to] a nearby dug-out and a Canadian stepped out. We were astonished to see that in this dug-out, war or no war, instead of participating in the assault, six Britishers were contentedly playing a game of cards. At first they paid no attention to us and kept on playing. When the game was over, a British medical orderly came over and said to me: 'Hallo, Fritz, are you wounded?' Then he bandaged me and gave me something to eat and drink.*
>
> *Gradually more and more members of my regiment showed up. After I had regained some strength, the Englishman took me by the hand and took me to the main dressing-station, where I was examined by a doctor. After that a Tommy took me to the nearest village.... I was then taken to a big camp behind the front, where I found several comrades, including my former company commander, Lieutenant Schultz.*

THE CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE — 12th BRIGADE

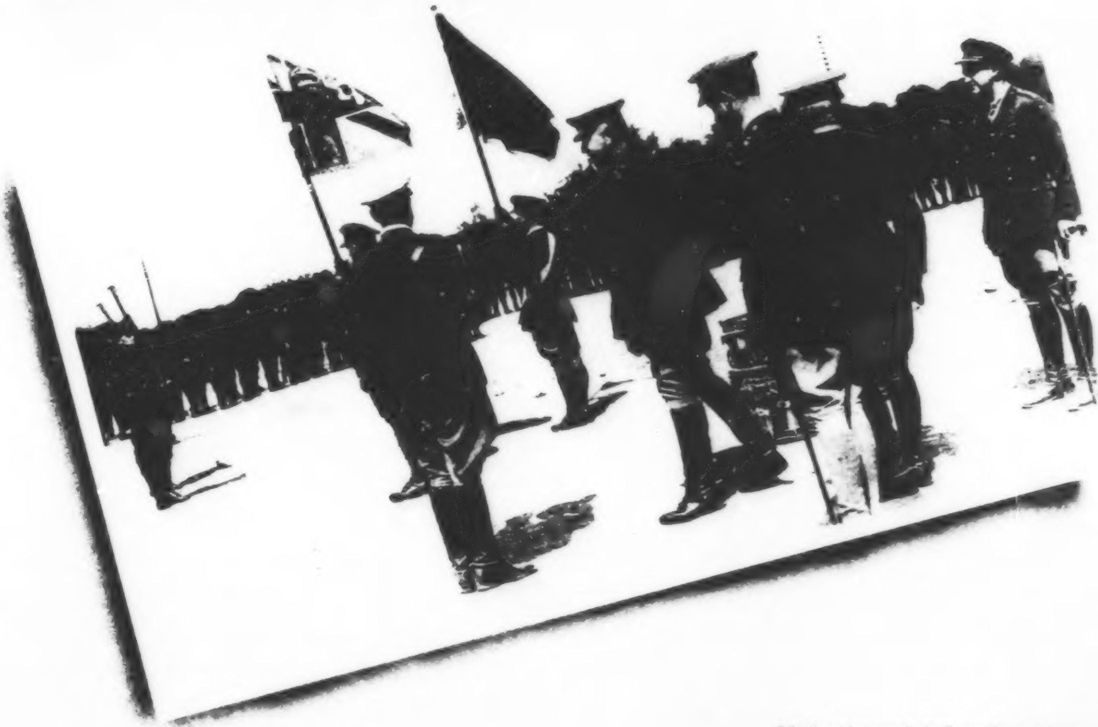
It seems likely that Otto Schröder had faced some part of the attack of Brigadier-General James MacBrien's 12th Brigade, responsible for taking the lower north-western slopes of Hill 145, facing — and overlooked by — the Pimple. From a Canadian perspective, however, the battle for Hill 145 did not go quite as well as Schröder's narrative might suggest.

When the attack began, the Pimple was blanketed by smoke and gas delivered by Canadian and British artillery, and the German troops there were further stunned by the detonation of two large mines under their positions. 'Leaning on the barrage', Montreal's 73rd Battalion (Royal Highlanders) reached the Brown line within ten minutes, 'with practically no opposition' and very few casualties.

By 6 a.m. 'consolidation was in full swing' and by mid-morning the Montrealers had built up a strong defensive position looking across part of the saddle that linked Hill 145 to the Pimple. But in retrospect it can be argued that they ought to have been ordered to go further. The 'firm flank' that they provided seems to have been too short, and perhaps they should have been given as their objective some feature over the crest of the ridge — or, at the very least, that German strongpoint which lay a short distance ahead, just on the flank of the unfortunate 72nd Battalion.

Vancouver's 72nd Battalion (Seaforth Highlanders) was supposed to reach the south-west corner of Givenchy-en-Gohelle, beyond the crest of the ridge. However, as the Highlanders pushed along the Brown line — as the map indicates, it angled

Canadian "highlanders" work with pick and shovel to build a road over shell-torn ground. [NAC PA 686]



Major-General Arthur Currie presenting a regimental colour to the 47th Battalion. Why would the 1st Division's commander present colours to a 4th Division unit? Because the 47th had been raised in British Columbia, and Currie was a British Columbian, too. [DND PMR 86-485] sharply back on their front — things began to become unstuck. The ground in front of them, 'a mass of shell holes filled with water', was worse than that which they had just crossed. Struggling through the mud, and under fire from the strongpoint in front of the 73rd as well as the Pimple and Hill 145, their advance slowed and finally stuttered to a halt significantly short of their objective.

One of the junior officers, Lieutenant D.O. Vicars, moved around to the left, towards that hard-hitting strongpoint that lay in front of the 73rd's position, and 'with a couple of men, the remains of his platoon, attacked a party of 50 of the enemy ... and drove them into our barrage, capturing 8 prisoners and killing many of the remainder. The rest fled overland towards Givenchy.' That might have opened the way for the rest of the Seaforths to resume their advance — and Vicars was decorated with the Distinguished Service Order (the 'poor man's VC' when awarded to a subaltern) in recognition of his feat — but they simply could not do so. They had taken too many casualties. Stuck in the mud, with the threat of an open flank on their left, the Vancouver men lurched to a reluctant halt on the Black line, some three hundred metres short of Givenchy-en-Gohelle.

The 38th (Ottawa) Battalion, on the 72nd's right and halfway up the slope of Hill 145, (and, most probably, facing the German defences where Otto Schröder had begun his day) found the going equally hard. The cut-up ground it had to cross made it difficult for the heavily-laden attackers to keep up with the barrage, and 'many men fell wounded, into shell holes full of water and were drowned.' Although the battalion reported that it had taken all of its objectives just fifty minutes after the attack began, in fact the assault companies had missed, and bypassed, three large craters full of Germans. Moreover, slowed down by the mud, they had fallen too far behind the barrage and left the enemy time to man his trenches. Soon they were under fire from all directions and their battle broke down into a number of small, unconnected, and very fierce and bitter fights.

Sometime after 7 a.m. Captain T.W. MacDowell, DSO, commanding A Company, was involved in a series of these.

> *The mud is very bad [he reported to Battalion HQ] and our machine guns are filled with mud. I have about 15 men near here and can see others around and am getting them in here slowly. Could 'D' Company come up in support if they have stopped in the front line?*
>
> *The runner with your message for 'A' Company has just come in and says he cannot find any of the Company officers. I don't know where my Officers or men are but am*

> *front of here as I can see by the rifles stuck up.**

MacDowell held on, — he would be awarded a Victoria Cross for his valour and leadership this day — and at mid-afternoon politely suggested to his commanding officer that 'you take it up with Brigade that this place be occupied in strength.'

> *... there is a great field of fire to the North and West as well as to the East. This, you see, makes it a very strong supporting post to our left flank, and I would strongly recommend that it be occupied by Brigade machine-guns. I cannot locate them, as I have no NCOs to leave in charge here to look for them myself.*
>
> *It is quite alright for anyone to come up here. They are firing at us all the time with their heavy guns ... but I have no casualties to report since coming in except being half scared to death myself by a big brute [of a shell dropping nearby].*
>
> *I cannot impress on you too much the strength of this position and [the] value of it as a strong supporting point to the left flank, by which they [the enemy] will undoubtedly make their counter-attack.*

In fact, it was on the right, closest to the summit, where the main trouble lay. The 11th Brigade, assigned to take the summit and the higher southern slopes, was having its difficulties, as we shall see; but so were the Winnipeggers of the 78th Battalion, who, as MacDowell had reported, had 'gone through' his position on their way to take and secure the German second position, over the crest of the ridge. Few of them ever got there; and fewer still returned. 'During their advance,' the brigade commander noted:

> *... they suffered very severely from M[achine]-G[un] fire from both flanks and also from BANFF trench. Although not known at first, the fact was subsequently established that portions of [the battalion] reached CYCLIST trench and were immediately counter-attacked by overwhelming numbers from the dugouts in rear.... The enemy evidently got the better of this local encounter as at 8:30 a.m. [just after MacDowell made his first report] about 200 of them counter-attacked the 1st objective of the 78th Battalion....*

No wonder the 78th disappeared from Captain MacDowell's view — and we can figure out who the wounded were in front of him. Moreover, by beating the Winnipeggers back the enemy was able to remain in his shell holes on the forward slope until early evening, so that with the Pimple and the summit of the hill still in German hands they could fire into the 12th Brigade's new positions from both flanks as well as from directly in front. The brigade's losses, by the end of the battle, would total 65 per cent of those

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* It was customary for advancing troops, passing a wounded man, to take his rifle (with fixed bayonet) and stick the bayonet in the ground, so that the rifle butt provided a marker for stretcher-bearers following up the attack.

Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden inspects his cousin's 85th (Nova Scotia Highlanders) Battalion during his vist to France in March 1917. [NAC PA 871]

Brigadier-General Victor Odlum, whose 11th Brigade was to have taken Hill 145 in the initial attack. [NAC PA 2117] 'who took part in the actual assault.' Hardest hit was the 72nd, in full view of the enemy on the Pimple (76 per cent), and the hapless 78th, shot at from every direction. But it was from Hill 145 that the Winnipeggers were punished most heavily — because Victor Odlum's 11th Brigade was failing to do the job asked of it.

THE 11th BRIGADE — 'AS WARLIKE AS RABBITS....'

No one in the 11th Brigade had anticipated that they would have an easy time. Although they did not have so far to go as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions, the slope in front of them was steepest, and from previous raids and aerial reconnaissance it was clear that the enemy's defences here were the strongest. There were four trench lines to be taken before any attacking force reached the summit of Hill 145, and at least two more on the reverse slope that had to be taken for all of the hill to come under Canadian control.

Although these defences had been heavily shelled in the preliminary bombardment, the enemy's dug-outs were particularly deep and strong. Moreover, the steep ground, unbelievably pockmarked with craters and shell holes and a morass of mud and water, made it too difficult for the heavily-laden infantry to keep up with the barrage. Consequently, most of the defenders remained safely below ground until the Canadians approached, but were then able to surface in time to fight them off. Each trench line, in short, meant a major struggle and substantial casualties.

The right flank, bordering on the 3rd Division's front, was allocated to the 102nd (North British Columbian) Battalion. Going over the top 'in perfect formation,' the 102nd reported the first two lines of trenches taken at 6 a.m., and the third twenty minutes later. The battalion then dug in against the expected counter-attack (which did not materialize), but came under such intense and constant fire from Hill 145 that by about 9 a.m. every officer had been hit. One of the company sergeant-majors took command, however, and the northerners held their ground.

The 54th (Kootenay) Battalion was to have passed through their fellow provincials and taken the crest of the ridge immediately south of Hill 145 — where they, too, were to dig in. A few reached the top, but 'facing strenuous opposition ... on the extreme left' — the summit of the hill — 'persistent sniping from points in rear of our position', and also worried by enemy attempts 'to work around our left flank', the 54th then withdrew down the slope a little way and joined the 102nd where it was dug in.

There was no further withdrawal here, but as E.L.M. Burns, the brigade signals officer, points out, there was also no great interest in going forward again. 'From the ruined communication trench,' he tells us in *General Mud*:

> *I got back to the old German front line, which I had left about an hour before. I found eight or ten men — some of my party and some infantrymen — sitting on their backsides with no idea of what the immediate future was to bring forth, but quite cheerful, on the whole, in this comparative safety. Two or three of them had rifles. A Lewis gunner, a lance corporal, arrived just then, his gun covered with mud and out of action. I told him to clean it, set some of the men to collecting German bombs and posted a sentry.*
>
> *...I peered over the parapet cautiously, and saw two or three Germans standing waist high in [a] trench ... not more than 150 yards away. As I looked at the Germans, behaving as if they were at a rabbit shoot, and the men around me, who seemed to be about as warlike as rabbits, I grew rather angry and asked one gaping ... private what he thought he had a rifle for.*

Progress on the right was slow because, for a time and in part, the centre had practically collapsed. The 87th Battalion (Canadian Grenadier Guards) were in the first wave but for some reason — the likeliest being that the Guards' commanding officer wanted to use it as a first-aid station and battalion headquarters later on — a section of enemy trench barely a hundred metres in front of them had been left untouched by the artillery bombardment. Subsequently, the company assaulting it was virtually wiped out in just six minutes, and 'sixty per cent of its strength lay dead on the ground.' It was not a good beginning, delaying the other guardsmen so that they lost the barrage, and those who tried to continue the advance were cut down by German machine-gunners firing from positions of relative safety.

Moreover, their regimental history complains:

> *...the benefit of practice over tapes, and the intimate knowledge of the defences and of the roles laid down for platoons and companies, was rendered quite useless in the first ten minutes. The machine gun and rifle fire was so intense that cohesion of companies, platoons and even sections was irecoverably lost: thus it was that those individuals who reached the opposing trenches joined with chance comrades to continue the fight.*

The 75th (Mississauga) Battalion, who should have followed the 87th, were completely unnerved by what they saw happening ahead of them. Many did not move out of their trenches at all; others, who advanced a little, 'scattered [and] did not maintain cohesion. Elements ... were later found all over the brigade area.' With the collapse of the 75th and 'the defection' (as the 54th and 102nd Battalions saw it) of the 87th, the

Germans still held a bulge in the Canadian line which left the British Columbians with open flanks and allowed the enemy to fire into the rear of the 12th Brigade.

The remnants of the 87th redeemed themselves somewhat in the early afternoon. Having rallied their men, the surviving officers formed *ad hoc* bombing parties and, one by one, knocked out the machine-gun nests and strongpoints blocking their advance. They disappeared 'in a veil of smoke and fumes,' the colonel commanding the German 261st Reserve Regiment recalled, 'while the fiery flashes of grenades and mines illuminated the battlefield.' But the Grenadiers, now a spent force, did not reach the summit.

THE FINAL EFFORT

It was time, therefore, to call on the reserves: the 46th (South Saskatchewan) and 47th (British Columbia) Battalions from the 10th Brigade, and the 85th (Nova Scotia Highlanders) of the 12th Brigade. On the 10th Brigade front:

> *The objectives of ... the 46th Battn. were craters 1, 2, and 3, and to establish touch with 11 Bde on the Right...*
>
> *This advance was carried out splendidly. About 150 of the enemy were encountered in the vicinity of No 3 Crater and were dispersed, a machine gun and several prisoners being taken....*
>
> *The losses ... in this advance were not heavy, and the whole situation was cleared up.*

For those taking part, it had been almost too easy if the mud was discounted. 'We went through a long tunnel,' a private in B Company remembered:

> *... deployed, and struggled through the mud without a supporting barrage, trying to avoid water-filled shell holes as best we could. We faced machine gun fire and scattered overhead shrapnel, but my section made it to the far lip of a gigantic crater which was our objective.... We had a shorter distance to travel than some of our boys, and looking to our right we could see our line of troops moving forward with little groups of Germans working towards the rear by short dashes from shell hole to shell hole. We blazed away at them.*

The 47th also gained some ground, but their success turned on the performance of the 85th (Nova Scotia Highlanders) Battalion. In the heyday of Sam Hughes, the 85th had been recruited and sent to England with the intention that it should form part of a Canadian Highland Brigade. The heavy casualties incurred on the Somme, however, had led to the disbandment of three of the four battalions concerned, to provide reinforcements for battalions already in the field, the exception being the 85th — perhaps because it was commanded by Prime Minister Borden's cousin, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Borden.

The Highlanders had been sent to France intact in the spring of 1917, with the intention that they would eventually replace the 73rd Battalion in the 4th Division's 12th Brigade.[*] However, when the attack was planned (and even when it was launched) they were still far from fully trained, and no one in the Corps regarded the 85th as a combat unit. At Vimy it was supposed to serve as a labour battalion, assigned to such 'pick and shovel' duties as might be needed, and the bringing forward of ammunition and other supplies, in order to save the fighting troops those burdens. (That, it will be remembered, was one of the lessons that Arthur Currie had brought back from Verdun.)

Now, as the attacks on Hill 145 faltered time and again, the untested men of the 85th were ordered to lay down their shovels and pick up their rifles. Zero hour for their assault on the upper slope of the north-western side of Hill 145 was set for 6 p.m.

An artillery bombardment — always the first and last resort of First World War commanders — had been laid on; but at the last moment, seeing how close his start-line was to the German positions (and, wisely, not entirely trusting the gunners!) Borden cancelled it. News of the cancellation did not reach the two assault companies, however, and they were consequently shocked and dismayed when, at the appointed second, all was silence.

They attacked nevertheless, firing as they went, and by about seven o'clock had secured at least some of the flattish summit and, in places, "passed over to the other side" in more senses than the religious one. Before the fight was done the 85th would have had fifty-six officers and men killed outright and almost three hundred wounded, 'many of whom afterwards died'.[*] But even though they were eventually supported by men of the 75th and 87th, and despite the efforts of the 46th and 47th Battalions on their flanks, by the end of the day Hill 145 had not been cleared of the enemy.

Brigadier-General Odlum certainly knew that his task had not been completed when he went forward to observe things very early next morning. 'As I got up on the top ... I could see that we had not got over; we were bent back on the top. There were Germans still up there....'

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[*] With seven battalions at the front recruited primarily from the Montreal area, it had been decided by the Department of Militia that Montreal was dangerously over-represented in the Canadian Corps, and two battalions raised in the city, the 60th and the 73rd should be disbanded and replaced by units raised elsewhere.

[*] With no antibiotics and much less sophisticated surgery, a much higher proportion of First World War wounded subsequently died of their wounds than was the case with those wounded in the Second World War and subsequent conflicts.

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER IV

THE END OF THE BATTLE

At 6 p.m. on Easter Monday, von Falkenhausen's staff ordered a reserve battalion of Bavarian infantry to recover the summit of Hill 145. It was midnight, however, before it reached its start-line on the Pimple, and when the men started forward many of them lost direction — perhaps deliberately, perhaps accidentally — while others found it impossible to slog through the mud and retain any kind of cohesion. Some lost their field boots in the mire and made their way back to the Pimple in their socks, or with bare feet; and those few who eventually crossed the saddle and got close to the Canadian outposts were dispersed by the fire of a single machine-gun. A second attack, just before dawn, met with no more success.

But if the Germans could not recover the ground they had lost, the Canadians were also unable to crown their victory of the 9th by securing all of the upper slopes of the summit that day. In places, it seems, they were over the crest (which was not a sharp one) but they were certainly not yet where they wanted to be — in full control of the steep eastern slope that dropped down to La Folie Wood. All through the night, and through the morning hours of the 10th, artillery fire was directed upon the German positions there, and on their likely avenues of supply and reinforcement.

HILL 145 — SECOND EFFORT

General Watson had earmarked his reserve brigade to assault and take the Pimple on the morning of the 10th. But now the Pimple must wait; instead, he ordered the brigade to complete the capture of Hill 145, and the 44th (Manitoba) and 50th (Calgary) Battalions were sent forward together, the former on the right. Before they could launch an attack, however, an accompanying barrage had to be arranged, its rate of movement co-ordinated with that of the infantrymen, and timings agreed among all concerned.

It was mid-afternoon before everything was ready. The Pimple was again covered with smoke and gas to some effect, but not enough to entirely screen the attack or neutralize its garrison. The 44th Battalion, on the right, was masked to some extent by the summit and not much bothered by fire from that direction.

> ***A most beautiful barrage opened up and we looked out to our left and saw the 50th ... going over the top, just like in the book. It wasn't half-an-hour after that my commander***

> *came running along and said "Look, we've got to get over the top of this hill." I said "When do we go?" He said "Right Now." Well, right now ... we went....*
>
> *We bounced over, from shell hole to shell hole, in and out, and up and down, and finally we got over to the bottom [eastern foot] of the Ridge without any opposition but we did run into a bunch of dugouts in the side of the hill, and there were all these Germans. They thought the battle was over, apparently, because they were just sitting around in the entrance to their shelter. So I banged off a couple of pistol shots, and that wakened them up and they all came out with their hands up and were willing to quit. But that wasn't the finish, for pretty soon the Germans that had gone over into the flat started to shoot at us, and they were getting a few, because we didn't have much shelter. We were on the down side of the hill. We did stick it, then that night we were relieved [by the 47th] and moved off towards the bottom of the PIMPLE for our next show....*

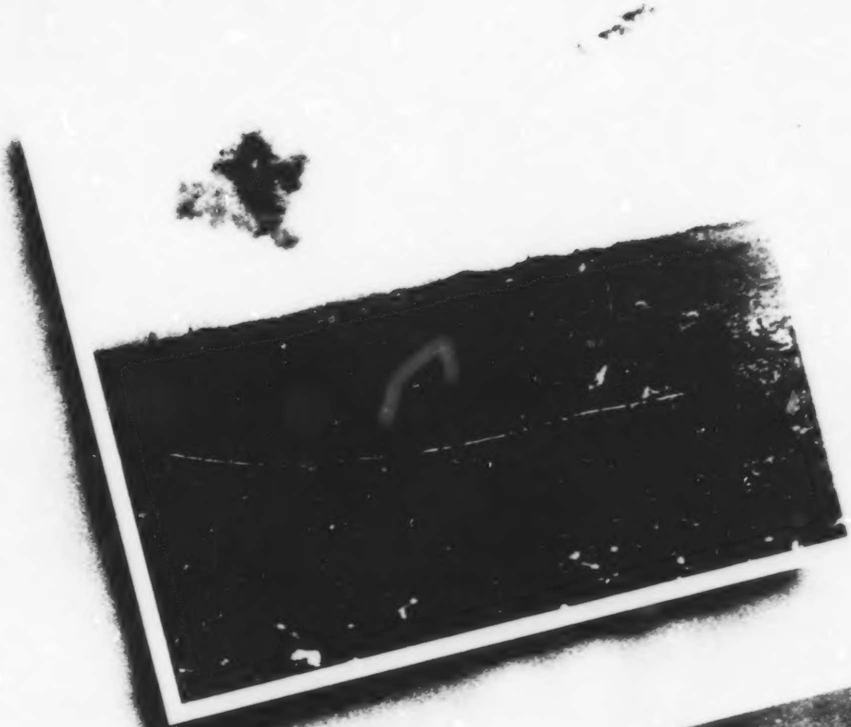
The 50th, more exposed to the fire from the Pimple, had a much more difficult time. German machine-guns, manned as gallantly and determinedly as ever, raked the battalion, causing heavy casualties. With the fighting line also thinned by the need to struggle through the remnants of wire obstacles and wrecked concrete machine-gun posts, not to mention the fatigue quickly brought on by struggling through the mud, one particular outpost could not be mastered by the men of A Company. B Company arrived to reinforce the advance, another attack was organized, and again the Canadians were stopped in their tracks.

It was then that 42-year-old John George Pattison, a British-born engineer from Calgary when he had enlisted, (and who already had a son serving in the CEF) won the 4th Division's second Vimy VC.

> *He advanced single-handed towards the machine-gun post in a series of short, rapid dashes, taking cover on the way in available shell holes while deciding on his next move. In a few moments he had reached a shell hole within thirty yards of the vital strong-point. He stood up in full view of the machine-gunners and, under their point-blank fire, threw three bombs with such good aim that the guns were put out of action and the crews temporarily demoralized.*
>
> *This was Pattison's opportunity and he took it without hesitation. As his last bomb exploded amidst the Germans, he rushed across the intervening space and in a moment was using his bayonet upon the unhappy enemy. He had killed them all before his companions had caught him up.*

When all the planning has been done to perfection, and every 'loose end' tied up, success (or failure) in

Shrapnel shells burst over Canadians consolidating their new-won positions on the top of the ridge. [NAC PA 1131]



A concrete machine-gun nest like that knocked out single-handedly by John Pattison, VC. [NAC PA 882] battle often hinges on the actions of one man, or perhaps one group of half a dozen men. Pattison's single-handed thrust broke the stalemate on the north slopes of Hill 145, and within half an hour all the Canadians' objectives had been taken. But although Pattison subsequently learned that he had been recommended for a VC, he never had the privilege of wearing it. He was killed in action, in front of Lens, two months later.[*]

Now that the 10th Brigade was on the Brown line beyond Hill 145, the battle for Vimy Ridge was over. With the enemy now looking down on them, the plain under the ridge was totally indefensible and the Germans began to pull back to positions three or four kilometres away. On the western, or reverse, slope of their new positions, and on the top of the ridge, on ground that the German army had held against all comers for more than two years, thousands of men were soon working with pick and shovel. Their task was to build plank roads through the mud, so that artillery, ammunition, water and hot meals, and all the paraphernalia that the infantry had discarded before the attack began, could be brought up to emplacements just behind the crest (as viewed from the Douai plain) in perfect safety.

THE PIMPLE — 'NOT ESSENTIAL IN THE FIRST INSTANCE....'

There was still the matter of the Pimple. Originally, First Army plans had called for I (British) Corps to take it simultaneously with the Canadian Corps attack on the ridge proper, but the British had subsequently argued that they did not have the necessary manpower available to play their part. Responsibility for it had then been handed to the Canadians — specifically to the 4th Division — with Sir Henry Horne assuring Byng and Watson that, since 'the capture of the PIMPLE...was not essential in the first instance to the success of operations further south', where Hill 145 dominated the battlefield, it could safely be left alone until the rest of the ridge had been taken.

That did not sit well with General Watson, who probably felt that his manpower was stretched just as thinly as that of his British neighbours. Moreover, although Horne was technically correct about the relationship between the Pimple and Hill 145, as long as the enemy held the former (despite any masking with smoke or attempted neutralization with gas) Watson felt quite sure that some of his men

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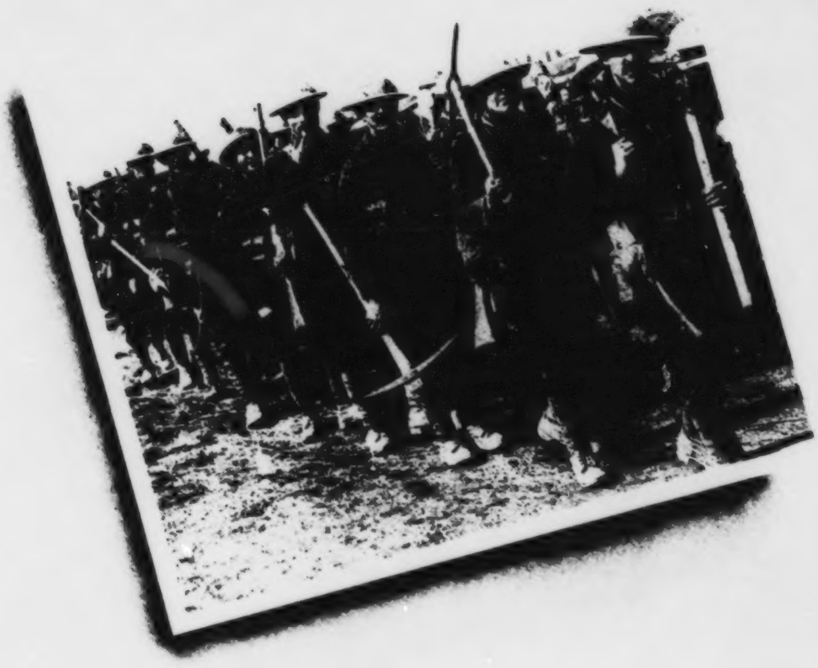
[*] **Apparently his son, who shortly afterwards came to the 44th Battalion, was permitted by his commanding officer to wear the ribbon of his father's medal over his right breast, instead of the regulation left. King's (or Queen's) Regulations have never authorized a son wearing his father's medals while in uniform, but on the basis of the Pattison case, widely reported at the time, it has become a not uncommon misconception among Canadians that it is (or was) allowed.**

"Thousands of men were soon working with pick and shovel." [DND 0-808]



Building a plank road through the mud. [NAC PA 1226]

CHAPTER V

THE VIMY MEMORIAL

Monuments to those who died at Vimy Ridge were being put up within days of the battle, the gunners and the 44th Battalion being first off the mark. These were unofficial structures, of course, heartfelt but of questionable artistic merit and erected without any formal permission. Their construction rather upset the French government, which was in the process of working out arrangements with its allies for the establishment of permanent memorials once the war was over.

When these arrangements were worked out — for cemetaries as well as memorials — there was no doubt as to where the main Canadian memorial should go. Although the Canadian Corps, as the spearhead of the *Entente* armies, had, by then, fought and won other, more portentous battles, Vimy Ridge (and Easter Monday, 1917) had a significance all their own. In 1922 the French ceded to Canada in perpetuity 91.18 hectares [250 acres] on the crest of the ridge for a memorial park.

In Ottawa,the federal government had already set up a Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission under Major General S.C. Mewburn, Minister of Militia and Defence 1916-1919, to supervise and conduct a design competition for a memorial to be erected on the highest point of the ridge. From one hundred and sixty submissions, the committee eventually selected that made by Walter S. Allward, a Toronto sculptor.

It was a massive project. Some 11,000 tonnes of concrete and masonry were required for the base, and another 5,500 tonnes of stone for the two pylons and sculptured figures. The Vimy Memorial would be built to last. After an extensive search for the best materials and an examination of the remains of a 3rd Century palace, built for the Roman emperor Diocletian, that were still standing (and showing few signs of erosion) near Split, in present-day Croatia, Allward located and re-opened the quarry once used by Diocletian's masons.

The stone was transported to France, where the actual carving would take place. Work on the Memorial began in 1925, and was completed eleven years later at a cost of $1.5 million — a staggering sum for the time. Standing on the summit of Hill 145, its base measures just under 75 metres across, while the two pylons representing Canada and France, are each forty-five metres high. Among the twenty sculpted assaulting the latter would be subjected to heavy enfilading fire. Total suppression of such a strong, well-developed position by artillery alone was not a practicable operation of war.

He had made his dissatisfaction known — well known — to his superiors. All that did was win him assurances that the artillery would make every effort to neutralize it. The gunners had, indeed, done their best, although it seems likely that the less-than-total success on the 9th had been due, in part, to fire from the Pimple. And fire from it may have caused a significant proportion of the casualties incurred on the 10th in completing the conquest of Hill 145.

It seems likely that if the Pimple had simply been ignored sooner or later the enemy would have withdrawn. Although he had constructed deep trenches and well protected dug-outs, relieving or re-supplying the garrison would have been very expensive in German lives as long as the Canadians held the greater height of Hill 145. And it would have been entirely at odds with the new defensive doctrine which emphasized, as it did, human economy.

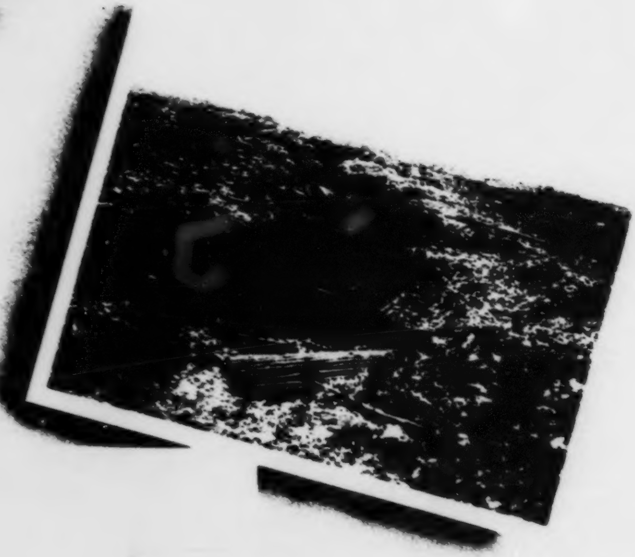
Apparently, however, neither Byng nor Watson questioned their orders to take the Pimple, perhaps because, in the short term, it was an obvious jumping-off point for any German attempt to re-take Hill 145 — something the enemy still seemed anxious to do. During the lull of 11 April the German commander had sent up to it a fresh and *élite* formation specializing in the counter-attack *rôle*, the 5th Grenadier Regiment of the 4th Prussian Guard Division. Here was a more formidable objective than ever.

In the preparatory phase of the Vimy operation, the 44th and 50th Battalions had been trained specifically for an attack on the Pimple. In the event, as we have just seen, it had been necessary to divert them from that assignment in order to complete the conquest of Hill 145; and that struggle, on the afternoon of the 10th, had cost both battalions, but particularly the 50th, significant numbers of fighting men. Nevertheless, those two units were still the best qualified to assault their original objectives and now they were ordered to do so. To compensate for their earlier losses on Hill 145, they were joined by two companies of the 46th (South Saskatchewan) Battalion, while the 47th (British Columbia) Battalion was assigned as reserve.

The attack would be launched in the pre-dawn darkness, at 5 a.m. on the 12th, along a front of nine hundred metres with artillery and field gun support proportionately exceeding that employed on the 9th. Having moved back to their forming-

Major-General David Watson, the peacetime militia officer who commanded the 4th Division in war. [NAC PA 2116]

Abandoned German trenches. [NAC PA 1150]



An enemy gun position destroyed by the artillery bombardment. [NAC PA 992] up points, as originally planned, the 44th and 50th would be carrying out essentially the same attack they had been rehearsing earlier, while the two additional companies of the 46th Battalion would fill in on their left, and, indeed, on the extreme left of the Canadian Corps front.

They did have one advantage that would have been lacking if the attack on the Pimple had been synchronized with that on Hill 145. Twenty-five metres lower than the latter, their objective could now be partially overlooked by the Canadians entrenched on the northern face of the summit, and their rifles and machine-guns could pepper much of its surface. But that meant little in so far as the impending assault was concerned, since the Germans would only be minimally exposed to it. The enemy's strongpoints boasted overhead cover (sometimes of concrete) and his entrenchments offered some protection from nearly every direction. To get at him, the attackers — after a full day to rest, replenish, and regroup — would have to cross open, gently-rising ground at the base of the knoll and then fight their way, yard by painful yard, up its carefully guarded slopes.

The infantry's covering barrage would only begin at 0500, but during the night both the Pimple and the German communication trenches around Givenchy were shelled by a large proportion of the corps' medium and heavy batteries, with additional support from the British on their left.

Private William Kentner of the 46th Battalion recollected being 'awakened about two o'clock and given a drink of hot soup and some biscuits.'*

> *We then filed out in the order in which we were to 'go over'. They issued us with picks and shovels, which we carried on our backs stuck down behind our equipment. It was a cold night with a mass of flying clouds, behind which the moon shone occasionally. Artillery activity had subsided, though one could still hear the crash of a bursting 'minnie' or the dull roar of our 'heavies'.*
>
> *The trenches were so pounded we were compelled to walk on top.... It was damnably hard work — making our way through that mud and water. Then the enemy detected us! Up went his flares, lighting everything about us. His rifles and machine guns opened up, and his persistent but ill-directed fire forced us take cover in the mire of the shell holes.*

We read in the British official history, written in the 1930s, that 'heavy machine-gun and rifle fire swept No-man's-land', but 'it passed

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* It has been clained by some historians that troops about to attack were encouraged to be half-drunk or worse, but the issue of rum seems to have depended upon the personal prejudices of commanding officers.

Canadian "Emma Gees" - a nickname derived from the initial letter of machine-gunners - on top of the ridge prepare to repel any German counter-attack. [NAC PA 1079]

"The whole plain of Douai lay at the Canadians' feet." In the foreground is Givenchy-en-Gobelle and the skyline of Lens, with its mines and factories, can be glimpsed in the distance. [DND 0-1830]

high over the trenches' at 4 a.m. How different these things appear to the fearful infantryman at the time and the urbane historian at his desk, years later. Nevertheless, by 4:15 'all were reported in position.'

As it had been on the 9th, the weather was unusually miserable for April and once again that would work to the Canadians' advantage. Once again, too, Kentner's unsophisticated account gives a better feel for the occasion than the more polished prose of the historian.

> *The clouds overhead had now become dense, and snow was beating down on us. For half an hour we lay shivering in the mud and water, but this wait caused the enemy to relax his fear. Conditions soon became normal, permitting us to rise from our damp and repulsive shelters and proceed to our jumping-off positions.*

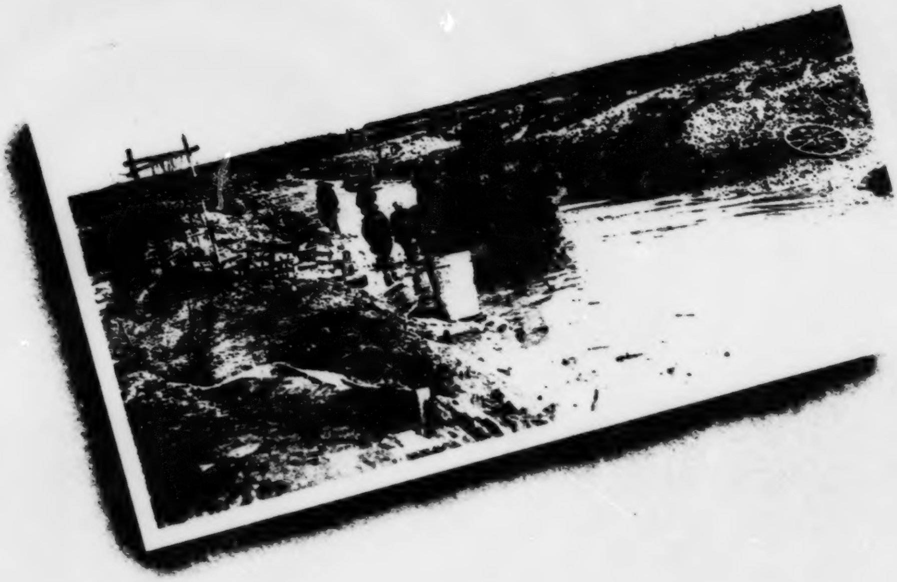
At 4:50 a.m. the barrage intensified as all the siege guns and heavy howitzers of two corps were brought to bear. Ten minutes later the field guns joined in.

> *Just as morning began to break we heard the rattle of many machine-guns and swish of thousands of bullets over our heads.... At once we stepped forward toward that crashing wall of bursting explosives which was our barrage on the enemy front position. Almost at the same instant, the snowstorm increased in intensity. Great huge flakes were beating down upon us and directly into the face of the enemy.*
>
> *We had hardly started when we began to have casualties. A man on my right dropped — another close by on my left went down — another barely three paces away let out a fearful yell and went sprawling in the mud. As we neared their front line, we were greeted by stick-bombs [hand grenades] which took effect but didn't stop us. In a moment we were in the front line. The bay I jumped into was occupied by four Germans — all dead.*

The wind-driven snow and sleet in their faces effectively blinded many of the Germans, just as it had done on 9 April. That was the only unplanned element in the operation, and without it the attackers might well have been decimated wherever they lagged behind the barrage. The men of the 46th did not lag but, even so, by the end of the day the two companies had taken 108 casualties, about half their strength.

The 50th Battalion, in the middle, was in place at 4:15 a.m. and went 'over the bags' at forty-five minutes later. They tried desperately to 'lean' on their barrage, but progress was unduly hampered by mud that was knee deep or more in many places. Slugging through it, in the dark and under fire, was a nightmare in itself, but by 5:45 the leading companies of the 50th had reached their objectives with only 'slight casualties.' Lieutenant-Colonel L.F. Page subsequently reported, without any particular emphasis, that 'fifteen

"Where the metalled surface still existed a deep coverage of mud narrowed the roadway and prevented drainage...." Trying to bring a motorized anti-aircraft gun forward. [NAC PA 1095]



13 April 1917: jubilant Canadians, off for a rest after the battle. [NAC PA 1267] prisoners were sent back, but only four reached our lines.' He added, with rather more enthusiasm, that 'I cannot say too much in praise of all ranks under my command during this operation. Their energy, courage, cheerfulness and endurance, under the most trying conditions, was wonderful.'

By 7:30, the 50th were consolidating well forward, having advanced most of the way through the Bois de Givenchy, 'which was fortunate, as the enemy got the range of our trenches [i.e., those German trenches that they were supposed to occupy] very accurately and shelled it [*sic*] heavily' for well over two hours. But the violent counter-attack expected all day never came, and by nightfall a company of the 102nd had come forward to strengthen the line.

The 44th Battalion, meanwhile, were on the right flank, closest to Vimy, and it was they who were asked to take the Pimple proper. The going was difficult here as well, reducing the pace of the attack to perhaps twenty metres a minute — only two-thirds the rate of their 'accompanying' barrage — but 'in spite of this,' reported its commanding officer, 'the advance was carried out steadily and mopping-up thoroughly done.' D Company, on the right, encountered no enemy troops in the front line of defences, but the 'Dug-out line, beyond, was found to be full of men. After some fighting, fifty-odd prisoners were obtained here.'

Like the Calgarians, the Manitobans continued their advance beyond the assigned objectives (one soldier went past his by about a hundred metres, because 'in the snow and sleet, you couldn't recognize anything') to a point where they found better positions from which to consolidate their gains. But feeling that their right flank was open — elements of the 12th Brigade's 73rd Battalion (soon to be disbanded) had actually withdrawn, in order, it was said, to give the 44th 'a clear field of advance' — they sent out reconnaissance parties to check on their neighbours. Their doubts were properly justified; these reconnaissances resulted in one officer's death and another's being captured.

'THE WHOLE PLAIN OF DOUAI LAY AT THE CANADIANS' FEET'

By mid-afternoon on 12 April the storm had passed, the sun was shining, and the Canadians on the Pimple could see the unspoiled lands to the north and east.

> ***From the crest the whole plain of Douai lay at the Canadians' feet. The vista was one of peaceful looking villages, nestling in gren woods, of prosperous towns on the far horizon, from whose high chimney stacks poured clouds of smoke, of railways over which trains were still***

Springtime comes even to battlefields. A Canadian officer takes a few moments to pick flowers - not poppies, in this case - growing in profusion among the wire. [DND 0-597]

King George V, with Generals Horne and Currie, surveys the Vimy battlefield. Interesting that Currie, the tallest of the three, chose to walk on the "duck boards," while the King preferred the ground and Horne respectfully followed suit. [NAC PA 1502]

> *travelling. The whole fertile plain was seared with roads, and the roads were alive with movement.*

It would have been nice if they had been able to taste the full fruits of victory and continue the advance while the enemy was still in relative disarray, but understandably they were now pretty well exhausted, perhaps emotionally as much or more than physically; and, it will be remembered, there were no Canadian reserves.

> *It was evident, moreover, that nothing in the nature of a pursuit, nor any operation of consequence, could be contemplated until artillery and ammunition could cross the shell-torn battlefield. The original main roads were the only practicable routes, and these had been partially destroyed by months of bombardment; in some places mines had been blown below them, leaving great waterlogged craters. Where the metalled surface still existed a deep covering of mud narrowed the roadway and prevented drainage, so that long stretches were indistinguishable from the ground on either side.*
>
> *The open country itself was impassable. The remains of wire entanglements, the shell craters and broken-in trenches prevented any movement except on foot, and even pack-mules, which took forward most of the supplies for the front-line battalions, had to use the roadways. Although over five thousand men had at once been set to work on the reconstruction and repair of these vital road communications, some days would be needed to make them passable for heavy traffic.*

On that note the battle for Vimy Ridge ended. Canadian casualties totalled just over ten-and-a-half thousand, of which three thousand, five hundred were killed or died of wounds. No figures are established for German losses, which, augmented by the four thousand taken prisoner, were probably very similar to the Canadian figure, and much higher as a percentage of those involved in the battle.

BRITISH AND FRENCH ATTACKS

With all his Vimy positions irretrievably lost, von Falkenhausen was withdrawing the disorganized remnants of his divisions from the foot of the ridge. Leisurely — because, as we have noted, they could do nothing else — the Canadians followed up, to the Avion-Méricourt-Oppy line, a couple of kilometres in front of the prepared reserve positions of the so-called Drocourt-Quéant 'switch' that tied the older northern reserve positons of the *Wotan Stellung* to Ludendorff's new *Siegfried Stellung*. 'The consequences of a break through of 12 to 15 kilometres wide and 6 or more kilometres deep are not easy to meet,' Ludendorff confided to his readers in 1919. 'In view of the heavy losses in men, guns and ammuntion resulting from such a break through, colossal efforts are needed to make good the damage.... Many days had to pass before a new line could really be formed and consolidated.'

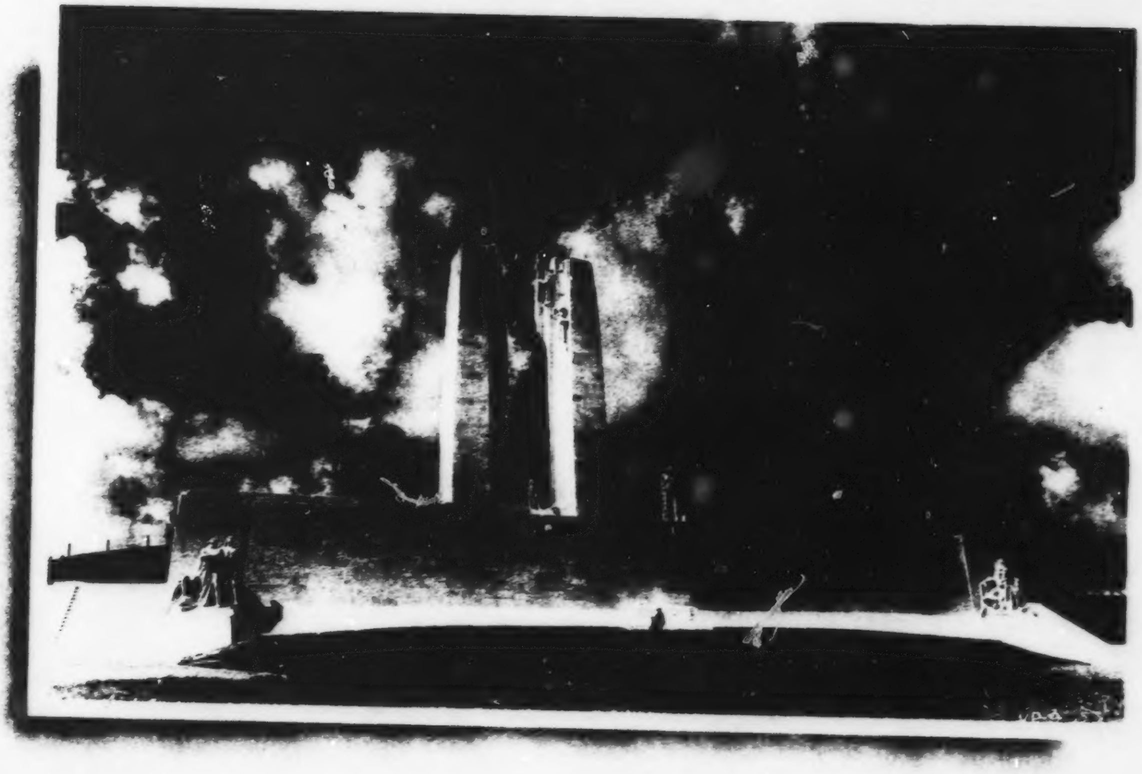
It will be remembered, however, that the object of the Canadian attack had been to secure the flank of Sir Edmund Allenby's Third Army, attacking down the valley of the Scarpe; that operation being, in turn, a subsidiary (and diversionary) element of a much greater French attack away to the south, between Soissons and Reims. Unfortunately, despite the Canadians' success, Allenby could make little headway. The Germans immediately to the south of the ridge eased back, in order to avoid too sharp an angle developing in their line, and then began to resist more and more tenaciously.

The further one moved south from the Vimy ridge, the more the depth of British penetration diminished, so that after a month of hard fighting the enemy had given up no more than one to two kilometres of ground where the front lines crossed the Scarpe. Another month saw a further British advance matching that of the Canadians which extended south to the Sensée valley — at a cost of nearly a hundred thousand casualties altogether. And along that line the Third Army stopped.

As for the great French offensive in the south, involving one and a quarter million men and seven thousand guns, it was an utter failure. Beginning on 16 April, Nivelle sacrificed a tenth of those men in five terrible days. Such crude and fruitless butchery brought on widespread mutinies in the French armies and Nivelle was replaced by *Général* Henri Pétain, whose first task was to suppress the mutinies, and second, to restore the morale of his troops.

That would take until the spring of 1918, and in the meantime Sir Douglas Haig would be called upon to keep the enemy fully occupied and off Pétain's back. He did that primarily at Passchendaele, where, in November, the Canadian Corps under Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie would do another 'great thing together'. And then would come, at Amiens, in the late summer of 1918, the first of those 'Hundred Days' (and one that Ludendorff would call 'the black day of the German army') in which the Canadian Corps would do so many great things together — bursting through the Drocourt-Quéant switch, crossing the Canal du Nord, breaking the Marcoing line, re-capturing Cambrai and the advance to Mons — that it would be widely recognised as the spearhead of *Entente* victory and win Canada a place at the peace table.

But that is another story.



CHAPTER V

figures that adorn the Memorial are Peace, Truth, Knowledge, Justice, Sacrifice, and — the largest single figure, carved from a single thirty-tonne block — a personified Canada brooding over the graves of her dead.

On the stone base are carved the names of the regiments that fought for Vimy Ridge, and those of 11,285 Canadian soldiers posted as 'missing, presumed dead' in France during the whole war. (Those who fell in Flanders are listed on the British memorial at Ypres.) The known dead, of course, are commemorated individually on the crosses that mark their graves, wherever they may be.

In the notable absence of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, the Vimy Memorial was dedicated on 26 July 1936 by King Edward VIII. Ernest Lapointe, the Prime Minister's Quebec lieutenant, C.G. Power, Minister of Pensions and National Health (who had been severely wounded on the Somme and thus missed the glory days of the Canadian Corps), and Ian Mackenzie, Minister of Militia and Defence, represented the Canadian government. Wartime Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden and Lady Currie, Sir Arthur's widow, were also present, together with nearly ten thousand veterans.

In dedicating the Memorial, Edward VIII declared:

> *We raise this memorial to Canadian warriors. It is an inspired expression in stone, chiselled by a skilful Canadian hand, of Canada's salute to her fallen sons. It marks the scene of feats of arms which history will long remember and Canada can never forget. And the ground it covers is the gift of France to Canada.*
>
> *All the world over there are battlefields, the names of which are written indelibly on the pages of our troubled human story. It is one of the consolations which time brings that the deeds of valour done on those battlefields long survive the quarrels which drove the opposing hosts to conflict. Vimy will be one such name.*

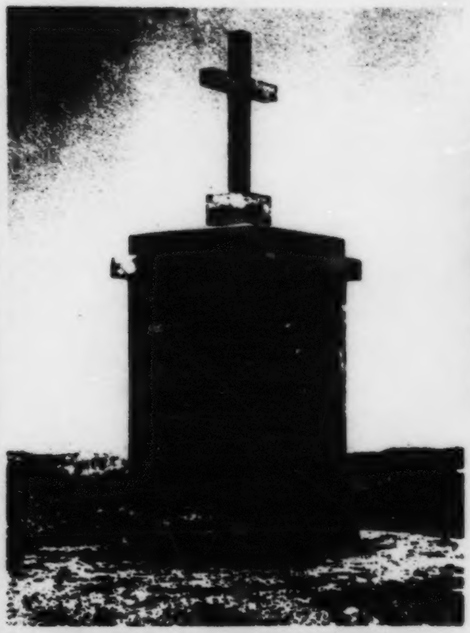
But the diary of one veteran, written in a kind of off-hand fashion that modestly reflected, perhaps, the fact that he was one of those being honoured, probably put things best.

> *A vast throng of people here. In addition to Canadians there are streams of natives coming to Vimy from all directions and in addition there are some 2,000 pilgrims from England.... Thousands of French war veterans are here also. Airplanes make a spectacular flight over the crowd and over the monument, flying in formation.... Speeches well heard through the amplifiers. Unveiling by King well done.*

Approximately half a million Canadians — out of the six hundred thousand who enlisted — served in France and Flanders during the First World War. Fifty-three thousand of

The 1st Canadian Division Memorial still stands on the south end of the ridge. [NAC PA 4504]

The 44th Battalion Memorial erected on the Pimple. [DND PMR 92-006]



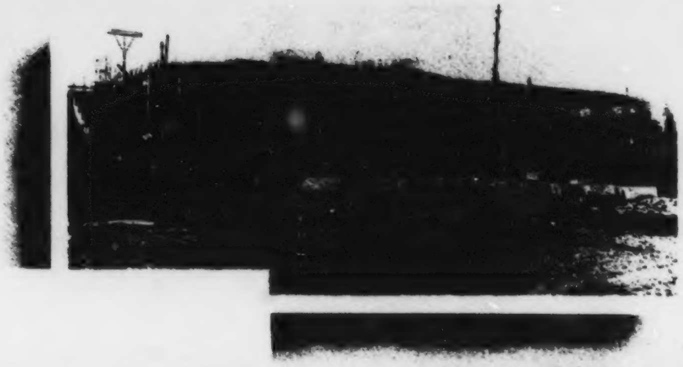
Sir Arthur Currie at the dedication of the Artillery Memorial, near the site subsequently occupied by Walter Allward's "two great pylons." [NAC PA 2390] them were killed in action or died of wounds or disease, and some thousands of others who survived were so badly mutilated, physically or emotionally, as to be dead in worldly terms. One might hazard a guess that around four hundred and forty thousand veterans of the Canadian Corps whole enough in mind and body to re-integrate into the mainstream of Canadian life eventually returned home.

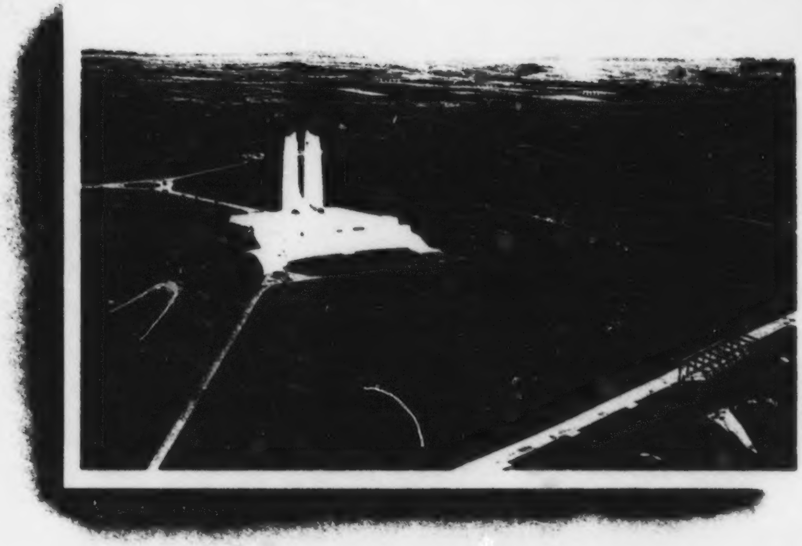
They brought back with them a new concept of nationhood based on their war experiences and, consciously or unconsciously, began to spread it across the land. To take just one example, there were at least two hundred working journalists among them whose thoughts and attitudes, conditioned by the comradeship of war, could not do other than 'Canadianize' their readers when they returned to their pre-war trade. Among them were H.C. Crowell of the Halifax *Chronicle* and E.E. Dennis of the *Herald*; Henri Chassé of Quebec's *L'Événement*; John S. Lewis of the Montreal *Star* and Hercule Barré of *La Patrie*; E.W.B. Morrison of the Ottawa *Citizen*; G.G. Nash and Beresford Topp of the Toronto *Mail and Empire*, W.F. Edgecomb of the *News*, Jaffray Eaton of the *Globe* and Gregory Clark of the *Star* (and later the nationally distributed *Weekend* magazine); Gordon Southam of the Hamilton *Spectator*, S.G. Webb of the Winnipeg *Tribune*; E.C. Whitehead of the Brandon *Sun*; Harris Turner of the Saskatoon *Star* ... and all the way west to R.J. Burde with the Port Alberni *News*. Some of them subsequently went into the new medium of radio, as well, and in both media 'new blood' which had also been on Vimy Ridge joined them over the next dozen years.

Some veterans went back to teaching, or took it up, at every level from elementary school to post-graduate university — as in the case of historians A.R.M. Lower and Frank Underhill (some of whose words have provided the epigraph for this book). Others turned to business, law, medicine, the church. Some went into industry, mining, or construction, and others, like Dr. R.J. Manion (who has also been quoted in these pages), C.G. Power and A.G.L. McNaughton, into politics and/or government.

Manion, a Conservative, became (briefly) leader of the opposition in 1938 but lost his parliamentary seat in 1940. Power, a Liberal, was associate Minister of National Defence through much of the Second World War, resigning in late 1944 when he concluded that Prime Minister Mackenzie King had broken his word on the conscription issue. *The* Minister of National Defence during Power's tenure as associate was that nit-picking, dry-as-dust lawyer, J.L. Ralston, who had been with the 85th Battalion at Vimy but

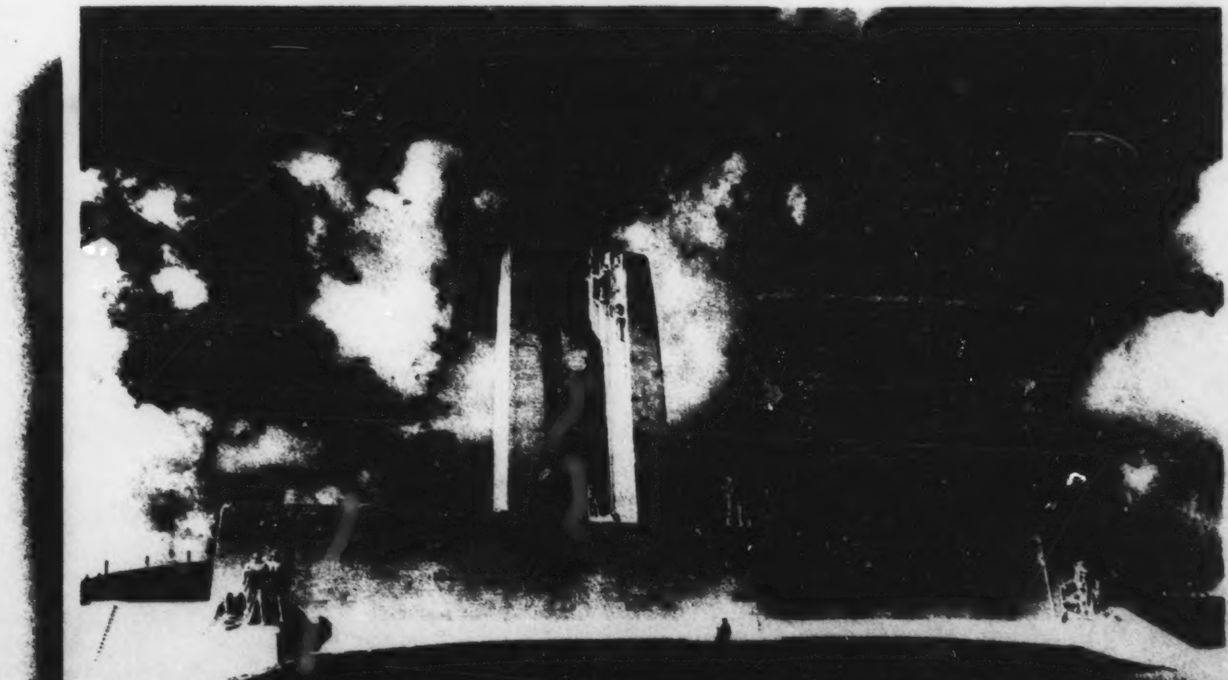
The base of the Memorial under construction on the summit of Hill 145 in 1928. [DND PMR 91-011]





The Memorial in 1936, awaiting its formal dedication by King Edward VIII in the presence of some ten thousand veterans. [DND VP-3]

"Canada" mourning her dead. [DND VP-9]



recorded no colourful comment to be cited in this work.

McNaughton, the scientist/gunner, stayed in the post-war army and rose to become chief of the General Staff, 1929-1935, when he was seconded to serve as president of the National Research Council. Recalled to the colours on the outbreak of war, he commanded, in turn, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, I Canadian Corps and First Canadian Army, 1939-1943. Subsequently he was Ralston's successor as Minister of National Defence, 1944-1945, president of the Atomic Energy Board, 1946-1948, Canada's permanent representative at the United Nations. 1948-1949, and a member of the Canada-United States Permanent Joint Board on Defence, 1950-1959 and the International Joint Commission 1950-1962.

E.L.M. Burns was another who stayed in the army, commanding I Canadian Corps in Italy during the Second World War and, in the post-war era, distinguishing himself as a commander of United Nations' forces. Victor Odlum went back to civil life, as publisher of the Vancouver *Daily Star* from 1924 to 1932, and then sat on the board of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the 1930s. In May 1940 he was given command of the 2nd Canadian Division, that appointment being terminated on the grounds of age (he was 61) at the end of the following year. He subsequently served as high commissioner to Australia, ambassador to China and ambassador to Turkey.

When Sir Julian Byng was promoted to command a British army in June 1917,* Arthur Currie was given command of the Canadian Corps. Shortly afterwards he was knighted by King George V, finishing the war as Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie — and it was largely Currie's integrity, painstaking professionalism and dedicated 'Canadianism' that carried the Corps to its subsequent victories. As Inspector-General, he was (briefly) the professional head of the post-war army, but his plans for a powerful peacetime force were thwarted by political realities. In 1920 he resigned, to become chancellor of McGill University until his death in 1933.

Byng made no great mark as an army commander. (Had he reached his ceiling, or were British soldiers less responsive to his leadership than Canadians had been?) In 1926 he was appointed governor-general of Canada, an appointment greeted with enthusiasm by 'Byng boys' all across the Dominion. He soon ran afoul of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, however, in the King-Byng constitutional crisis of 1926. Finding his position intolerable in the context

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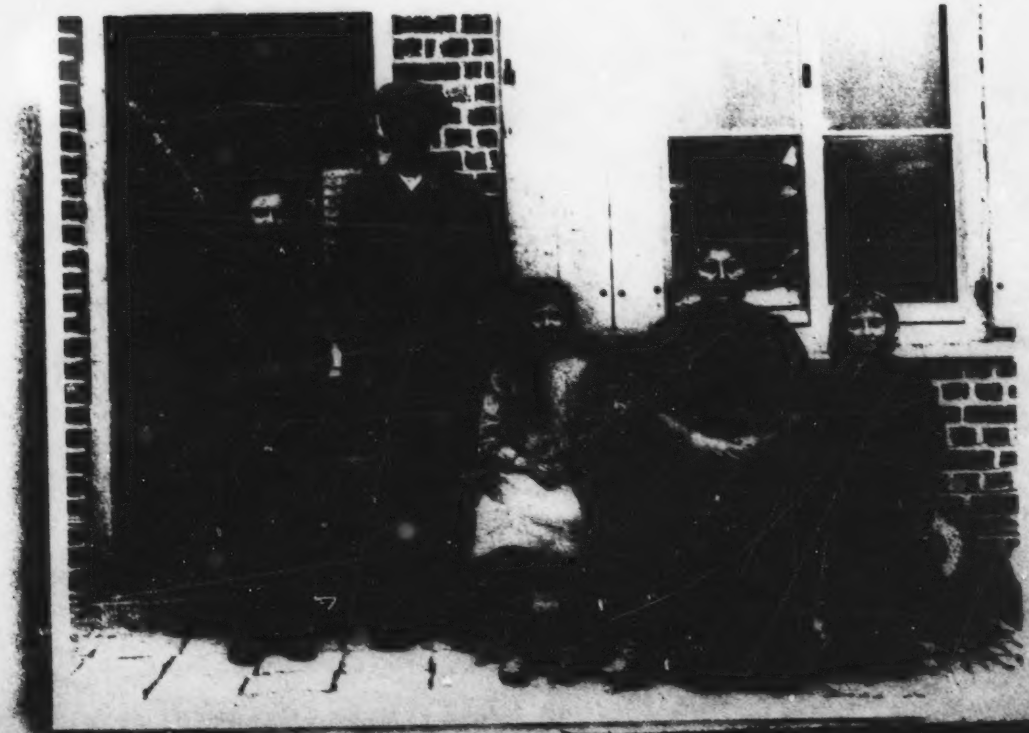
* **His aged opponent at Vimy, *Generaloberst* von Falkenhauser, was appointed governor of occupied Belguim shortly after the battle.**

Canadian Jack Harris, 4th CMR.

His enemy: two German soldiers captured on 9 April 1917. [NAC PA 1106]

What's it all about? A local family. [NAC PA 68]



of a King administration, he soon resigned and returned to England, to become commissioner of the London's Metropolitan Police, 1928-1931. He died in 1935.

After a career in the peacetime army, Georges Philias Vanier, who had been a major with the 22nd Battalion at Vimy Ridge and subsequently lost a leg in battle, became Canadian minister to France, 1930-1940, ambassador to France, 1944-1953, and Canada's second Canadian-born governor-general, 1959-67.

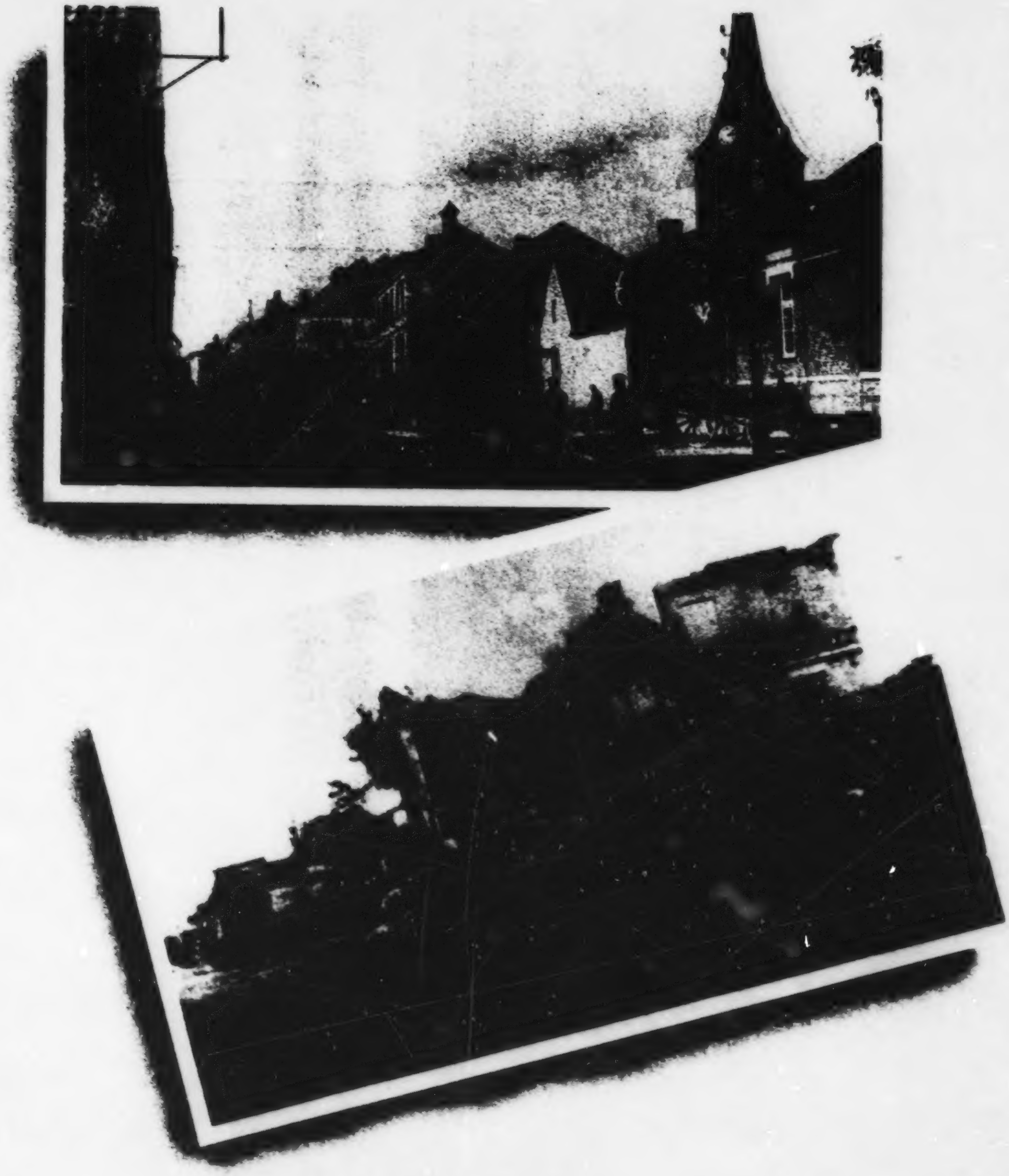
A DIFFERENT KIND OF CANADA

Many thousands of others, whose marks on history would never be so obvious as those mentioned above, came home and went about the business of making a living on farms and railways, in factories, mines and power plants, remembering to their dying day that they were Canadians first, and Maritimers, Quebeckers, Manitobans or British Columbians second, even if they were sometimes reluctant to express it quite so unambiguously. They came back to a very different country from the one they had left, and a society which was changing — and would continue to change — with unbelievable rapidity compared with one they had known before enlisting.

A rural, agricultural nation was rapidly becoming an urban, industrialized one (although small-town Canada was in no danger of disappearing) and better communications were enabling Canadians to learn more about each other than ever before. The populations of Montreal and Toronto had each doubled between 1915 and 1918, while that of Hamilton — steel town — had risen by 150 per cent. The value of iron and steel production had increased from $120 million to $443 million in the same period, while Canada was becoming — for a few brief years — the second largest producer of automobiles in the world.

The first commercial radio licence was issued in 1919 and by 1928 there would be sixty stations on the air. Already, in 1920, coast-to-coast telephonic comunication was possible. Rail travel was becoming relatively cheaper and annual holidays the rule rather than the exception. All these things worked towards 'Canadianizing' the country.

In the 1930s the Great Depression would clamp down on economic prosperity but, by then, travel had become engrained in the Canadian psyche. The veterans of the Canadian Corps still reminisced in Legion halls on Friday nights, and marched to local cenotaphs every 11 November to honour fallen comrades. Like Greg Clark (writing in the *Weekend* magazine of 13 November 1967), they had 'experienced my first full sense of nationhood' on Vimy Ridge,



What's it all about? The main street of Vimy before the war and after the battle. [DND PMR 91-012 and 013] and they still remembered themselves as Canadians who had done 'great things together'.

Let us end this book recalling the man with whom we began it — Private Jack Harris of the 4th CMR, who was (it must now be admitted) the grandfather of one of the authors. Jack was wounded twice (and gassed as well, on the first occasion) before the war ended — once, quite seriously, at Passchendaele and lightly again in the spring of 1918. When the fighting was done, he returned home to 'Lou and the kids' (one of them, in turn, would be wounded twice while serving with the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada over the summer of 1944) and to his pre-war trade of bricklaying. He laid bricks for Maple Leaf Gardens (the conception of another Canadian Corps veteran, Conn Smythe) among other buildings, and continued to work until he was seventy-five.

He joined the 4th CMR regimental association and the Canadian Corps Association (but not the Legion), nevertheless rarely speaking about his wartime experiences within the family. Perhaps only to his grandson, studying military history at McMaster University, did he confide, on occasion, that it was on Easter Sunday 1917 that he began to think of himself as a Canadian. The 'Last Post' sounded for him in 1972.

Twenty-eight years before Jack died, and twenty-seven after he trudged up Vimy Ridge, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Stacey, then the official historian of the Canadian Army Overseas, was one of a group of officers travelling across France in the train of another victorious Canadian army. He recalled the occasion when addressing the Canadian Historical Association in Canada's centennial year.

> *As we drove near Arras we suddenly saw before us, catching the sun high on the distant northern horizon, two great pylons; and we knew we were looking at Vimy Ridge. A quarter of an hour later we were standing before the memorial. I think we all felt a degree of emotion as we read the plain words that tell the story. 'The Canadian Corps, on April 9, 1917, with four divisions in line on a front of four miles attacked and captured this ridge.' Men who fought that day recalled fifty years later that it had been a moment of great national pride, that as they looked out across the Douai Plain from the conquered Ridge they felt that their country had come of age. If a single milestone is needed to mark progress on the road to national maturity, one might do much worse than nominate that famous Easter Monday.*

A little the worse for wear — for western European air has become much more polluted and acidic since the Second World War — on a fine day those 'two great pylons' still gleam whitely in the evening sun.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This account of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, set in the context of the history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is founded upon the relevant volumes of the British and German official histories, and on Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson's official volume on the *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1962), now unfortunately out of print in both official languages. Those narratives have been supplemented with archival material from the National Archives of Canada and the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History. Battalion and regimental histories were also consulted.

The 'colour commentary' comes from a variety of published diaries, letters and memoirs — mostly out of print — and unpublished reminiscences also to be found in the NAC and at DHist. A number of mongraphs on the battle have been published in English — Pierre Berton's *Vimy* (Toronto, 1986) probably being the most easily acquired — but there is nothing in French beyond the few paragraphs in Colonel Nicholson's work, G.F.G. Stanley's *Nos Soldats: L'Histoire militaire du Canada de 1604 à nos Jours* (Montréal, 1980) - also available in English as *Canada's Soldiers* — and the regimental history of the R22^{e}R. Worthwhile older works in English include Kenneth Macksey, *The Shadow of Vimy Ridge* (Toronto, 1965), which looks at the significance of the ridge in the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns, and in the Battle of France 1940, as well as the various battles fought there during the First World War, Alexander McKee's *Vimy Ridge* (London, 1966) and D.E. MacIntyre's *Canada At Vimy* (Toronto, 1967).

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